



BUT I NEVER SAID  
I DIDN'T LOVE YOU

ANDY DUNN

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Andy Dunn

Aspen Mountain Press

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### Warning

This e-book contains scenes that some may find objectionable. Please store your e-books carefully where they cannot be accessed by younger readers.

But I Never Said I Didn't Love You!

*To Sister Rosemary and Lee Pelton*

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## Chapter One

In line at the men's department, Brian checked his watch. He was late enough for work so what did he do?

Pop into the Marks & Spencer across from his Tube stop and buy some more underwear.

Like he needed it.

*Let it be known to all who read my obituary in the Daily Sun it was due to a time of great personal struggle, just after I'd spent my one-millionth pound on men's undergarments. He put his selections on the counter. A neurotic gay man who's overspending. How charming is that? God, sounds like there's a bad sitcom in there.*

Luckily, home and work were almost Tube stop to Tube stop so Brian was able to duck into the office nearly unnoticed. Nearly. He was at the receptionist to collect his mail when he saw Mr. Fairmerchant, his supervisor, coming down the hall.

"Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide," he muttered as he looked around for a conveniently-placed potted plant or coworker. "Damn."

"Mister Parker-Eddy." Fairmerchant held up his wrist as if to check his watch, and emphasized the first syllable of "mister" as he always did whenever he caught somebody doing...anything. Brian was certain Fairmerchant had been a headmaster or an Inquisition priest in a former lifetime.

"Yes, Mr. Fairmerchant. Terribly sorry." Brian all but genuflected in shame. "Just under the wire."

"Again. Honestly, I don't see how you're able to keep up such an attendance record without jeopardizing your productivity. And a unit head, at that."

"Yes, Mr. Fairmerchant. Sorry, sir."

"I believe we've wasted enough time on this chit-chat, so I'll leave you to it. Good day, Mr. Parker-Eddy."

"Mr. Fairmerchant," Brian replied with a small nod of his head. He continued down the hall and rolled his eyes. Brian unlocked his desk then dropped his M&S bag on his incoming tray. Like Fairmerchant, he wondered how he managed to get so much done in a day; everybody else around him struggled to match one quarter of his load in twice the time. Thankfully, the frequent overtime helped pay for his underwear fix and broke the monotony of weekly pints at the Feather and Larch.

"Bri, ye din't stop at M&S on yer way to work again, did ye?" A voice rich in Scottish lilt broke Brian's train of thought. He looked up, right into the huge brown eyes of his favorite coworker, Callum MacInnes. Callum was a couple years younger than Brian, his sandy hair and beard incredibly unkempt. "Rumpled" hardly began to describe Callum's clothes; he always looked as if he'd been unpacked from a holiday suitcase before arriving at work.

Which endeared him to Brian no end.

"There was an early sale. It ends at lunch." Brian dropped his bag into the personal drawer of his desk. "I would have missed it if I'd waited."

"Honestly. Ye're as bad as me wife when it comes to shopping excuses."

"I didn't have these colors."

"So. Who's buying lunch today?" Brian asked, his smooth voice washing over Callum.

"I'm not sure. I haven't seen the headline yet."

"Good. Ask Natalie, then. She usually has it."

"Hey, Natalie." A younger brunette looked up from her purse. "Ye have today's *Mirror*?"

"I haven't read it yet," Natalie replied.

"Sorry. I just want to see the headline, yeah? Two seconds. All I ask."

All right." Natalie dropped her purse onto her desk with an irritated sigh and pulled out a tabloid from an open drawer. "Here you go. 'Girl AVOWED—No more boozing, says manager of partying singer.'" She sounded like a student asked to read her research paper.

"Thank ye." Callum nodded as Natalie put her newspaper away. "Girls Aloud. Celebrity."

"Damn. I had Politician, didn't I?"

"Sorry, Bri. I'm not in a Burger King mood today, so it's real food."

"All right, all right. The things I do for the man I love."

"Now, now. I'll remind ye I'm married."

"My heart breaks every time you say that."

"Sorry, but sometimes the truth hurts."

"As my sainted gran liked to tell me in times like this," Brian said in a bad Cockney accent, "'Life can be like getting hit upside the head by a frozen haddock. It can be cold, it can be hard and it can hurt'."

"Are you making fun of me again?" Natalie asked from her desk, her own Cockney cutting through the air.

"No, Natalie. Sorry if I gave that impression." Brian wasn't too surprised he had to apologize once again. She'd called him out on his humor with Callum before.

"Well, just remember: Mr. Fairmerchant's got his eye on you both."

"We're wanted men," Callum said to Brian.

"Well, at least somebody's watching me."

"Ye'll always have me."

"Promises, promises."

"I'll see ye at lunch, then," Callum said with a laugh as he left Brian's desk.

"McDonald's it is." Brian pulled a stack of work from his in basket.

"And not McDonald's, either," Callum called from down the hall and elicited a snort of laughter from Brian.



Natalie watched until Callum was gone, then walked over to Brian's desk. "Brian, may I have a word?"

"Certainly, Natalie."

"I know you and Callum are having a laugh, but aren't you being unfair to him? After all, he is married."

"Natalie, he doesn't mind it at all. We have a giggle, go back to work, nobody's hurt. It just breaks up the day a little."

"I don't want you to think I have anything against you, Brian."

"I know that. You're always fair in your treatment of others."

"None of us have a problem with you or your lifestyle." Brian cringed at the word but Natalie continued as if she hadn't seen it. "It's just, well, I've seen such humor cross the line at another job I've had."

"We're fine, Natalie. We've become good friends since he started. It helps to have somebody like him at work. You have a good work friend, haven't you?"

"Well, yes. Yes, I have. There's Wanda Gale. We always have lunch together and she's chair of the firm's book club."

"I'm sure the two of you have some small, private jokes you always share that others don't understand."

"Yes, we share a laugh or two."

"So I'm sure you understand when I say that's what's happening between me and Callum. We both understand it's a joke and we let the other know when it's gone too far."

"Okay. As long as things are all right between the two of you."

"Perfectly fine."

"All right. Thank you for listening, Brian."

"Certainly, Natalie. Thank you for your concern." Brian smiled and nodded at Natalie, who did the same and went back to her desk. When she was gone, Brian leaned back in his chair. Of course, people didn't understand their jokes. Many people thought it scandalous that Brian Parker-Eddy, the Token Homo, had taken to brazen flirting

(*brazen!*) with one Callum MacInnes, a Married Man (*shock! horror!*) The flurry of email and whispers only stopped after an angry announcement Brian made while standing on a chair in the staff canteen one afternoon. He'd didn't want his friendship ruined over the idle chatter from some bored coworkers.

No matter how small the kernel of truth had been. Callum's eyes, accent and personality meant the flirting hadn't ceased completely. Brian tried to temper the intensity of the emotion behind it, but he sometimes found himself questioning his own motives, as his coworkers had.

Lunch was an uncomplicated affair at the nearby chippie. Quick, cheap and tasty, it always seemed to draw the office trade in a five-mile radius. Callum and Brian got in early enough to grab one of the last open tables, content to take up as much space and time as possible.

"I don't understand why she had to put her nose in it," Brian said as he shook malt vinegar over his food. "It's not like she's been concerned for our welfare before."

Callum put an extra bit of butter on his mushy peas. "She's Fairmerchant's early warning system. Ye ever notice ye can't say or do much in her presence without it getting back to him?"

"Splendid." Brian set the vinegar bottle down with an angry clatter. "Bloody hell. Feels like Fairmerchant's tracking our migratory habits."

Callum picked up the salt shaker and spoke to the cap. "Hallo? Mr. Fairmerchant? We'll be back from lunch on time, so don't worry. Love to yer missus and the sproutlings."

"Can you get Radio Two on the pepper? I'm curious to know tomorrow's weather."

On the way back to the office, they passed Marks & Spencer. Callum grabbed Brian's wrist and pulled him into the store. "Come on."

"Callum, what the hell are you doing?"

"An experiment. Just follow me and not another word."

"Coming, Mum."

Brian's heart did a little dance.

*He's almost holding my hand in public! Almost!*

Brian imagined Callum's long, elegant fingers entwined with his, soothed by the warmth from his skin. He'd never been touched by Callum, and had wondered if it would be soft and pleasant or coarse and harsh. Callum had said he was a city boy, but that didn't preclude weekend gardening or other rough work.

The sounds of the lunchtime crowd melted around Brian as Callum pulled him along. What he could see of Callum's face was bright with another smile (*oh, God, that smile!*) His back muscles moved under his shirt, and his ass cut a fine figure in his dress slacks, which left Brian breathless.

*Just one, long, slow, lingering squeeze. That's all I ask. That's all.*

"Here we are." Callum released Brian, who jolted back into reality. "Now. Would ye kindly explain to me what all this means?"

He spread his arms to indicate the racks and displays and hangers and packages filled with underwear.

"This' means men's underwear," Brian explained with a laugh.

"No, Bri. What does it mean?" Callum put his hands on Brian's shoulders and shook him a little. "Why, Bri? What's the reason? What's the allure? What does it mean?"

"I don't know," Brian said with a small shrug. "The best way I can describe it is I just iulike feeling a little...sexy. Like I'm being naughty and nobody knows it."

Callum squeezed Brian's shoulders a little more. "Thank ye. Ye've helped."

"Okay, I know I'm one to talk, since I wear secondhand clothing most of the time, but have you ever seen what I've bought in the past?"

"No, I haven't."

Brian pulled away from Callum's grip (*no!*) and walked to one of the racks. "Now, here we have your basic boxers. Dull, bland, lacking personality."

"Hey, I'll have ye know I'm a boxer man."

Brian put his hand on Callum's shoulder. "Thank you for that image, Callum. Next to them, it's a wider range of fashion briefs in every color and fabric possible."

"They do that with boxers."

"I'm not comfortable in boxers. They're loose. They bunch up around my legs funny. They make me sweat in places I'd rather not." Brian removed a hanger with a pair of black sheer briefs on it. "Now this is it. Everything's packaged just right. To me, they're sexier."

"How can ye be sexy in a pair of man panties?"

"I just like them more." Brian laughed and put the hanger back.

"I've never understood why they even design men's clothes like that."

"Trust me. It's just sex. They have that on the telly now. I'm sure you've seen it." Brian turned Callum around and pushed him forward to leave.

"But yer...I mean, the...and...but yer equipment is all bunched together," Callum stammered as red crept over his face.

"Packaging, sir, packaging."

"But doesn't it make yer arse itch, having the material that close to yer skin?"

"Only after I shave."

"What?" Callum faced Brian. "Even if ye're lying, please tell me ye're kidding."

"I am kidding, Callum." Brian used the opportunity as an excuse to take Callum's hand (*smooth, warm, comfortable skin*) to lead him out. "I've been convinced to do a lot of things in my life, but shaving my ass is not one of them."

"Thank ye, Bri. That image is now permanently burned into me mind."

"Glad to help. You know, Callum, I do have one more thing to add."

"Sure. What's that?"

Brian stared into his warm brown eyes. "For a straight man, you have an awful lot of concerns about my underwear."

Callum laughed. "Stop. Ye're babbling like a mad man."

"I'm only pointing out a small observation."

Callum glanced at his watch. "Ruddy fuck. All this larking about in man panties is making us late."

"Damnation. If we make the light, we'll get back in time but only just."

"Five quid says Natalie goes to Fairmerchant even if we're on time."

"Okay. It's a bet." They shook hands and picked up the pace. "I've done worse bets for less money."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Shaved my ass once."

"I knew it!" Callum howled.

"And stop thinking about what it looked like because it was positively repulsive, especially when the hair started growing back."

"Please, Bri. I'm not a very strong man right now. Me constitution can only take so much before I begin to weep."

"We can talk about yours, if you prefer."

"I knew it. I've heard the whispers that ye've been caught looking at me arse, practically falling over backwards as I passed ye in the hall."

"Well, how can I miss it? But I tell you, Callum, a nice pair of briefs will only improve the view."

"Oh, stop before I blush."

"Too late."

"Best of luck," Callum said as they passed Brian's desk. "Let me know when I stop down fer tea, yeah?"

"Of course." With a quick pat of Callum's shoulder, Brian maneuvered himself behind his desk and checked the "official" clock.

Two minutes early.

With a quick smile, he looked at Natalie. "Afternoon."

"Io." Natalie picked up a pad and some folders then stood and left, watching Brian out of the corner of her eye.

*Well. What a coincidence. Nothing left but to wait for Fairmerchant and his sword of justice.*

He took his wallet out and shifted a fiver to his pocket for delivery later to Callum.

When Brian had finished updating his tracking reports, it was almost tea time and Fairmerchant had failed to materialize. His paranoia had probably run rampant and

Natalie hadn't gone off to tattle. Or maybe the old man decided it wasn't worth it to put his shoes back on and haul his carcass down to the department for another "friendly chat with the lads."

Whatever the reason for Fairmerchant's non-arrival, Brian was relieved he'd kept his distance.

\* \* \* \*

Later that afternoon, the rumpus all but forgotten, Natalie brought a few folders to Callum's desk. "Honestly, Callum, I know you and Brian are having a bit of a lark, but aren't you afraid others will misinterpret what's going on?"

"Well, no. Why? Should I be?"

"After all, you are married. I think he's being a bit unfair."

"We're just fine, Natalie. I don't think he means any harm. We know each other well enough to prevent anything untoward from happening."

"Okay." Natalie held up her hands. "As long as things are all right between you two."

"Absolutely fine."

"Very well. Sorry to intrude."

"No intrusion, Natalie. I hope ye feel better after talking about it."

"I do. Thanks, again."

"Any time." Callum leaned back in his chair after Natalie had left. He didn't think he could get upset with Brian over his behavior, and thought he might even relish the attention. As blatant as he could be, as brash as the language was, Brian was always a perfect gentleman. No unwanted physical contact.

As scruffy as Callum appeared, that's how well-groomed Brian was. His grey ponytail trailed down to his waist, his mustache and goatee were neatly trimmed and his shirts and slacks were always pressed. Even his shoes and his "hoi Loondun" accent, as Callum liked to call it, were posh and polished.

Normally? Normally, Callum wasn't attracted to men but Brian had caused him to rethink his position. Maybe Callum wasn't attracted to men. Maybe Callum wasn't really all that attracted to men, much. No, his wife Theresa made sure of that.

Still. Those blue eyes.

*Where the hell did that come from?*

Callum sat up and patted himself on the cheeks to break the reverie. He thought whatever he'd felt for other men was in the past and changed the day he'd met Theresa. He couldn't break his vows, so nothing could happen with Brian, no matter how shaky the situation with Theresa.

Callum wondered how much longer he and Theresa could carry on the way they were. They'd had their rough patches, but the current one had gone on for a long time. The arguing had let up, but had been replaced by long periods of icy silence. Neither he nor Theresa seemed willing to budge, and any attempts to smooth things over quickly collapsed when one found a new fault with the other.

Callum still loved Theresa on some level, and he had to honor the commitment he'd made on their wedding day. He fiddled with his wedding ring, rotating it around his finger. It felt looser, as if his finger had shrunk or the ring had grown half a size. Still, he'd stood before Theresa, God and creation to proclaim his love for her.

Theresa knew about his attraction to other men when he proposed, so it wasn't like he was going to completely give up being friends with any men, gay, straight or whatever. Callum had been honest; he told her he had always liked men and wasn't certain that would change.

Theresa was different. Callum hadn't felt the same way about anybody else, certain that she was The One, etc.

She had been, at some point—another place, another time. Callum felt he had to stick things out for both their sakes and hoped to make things better or they would improve on their own. But the speed with which they had deteriorated without intervention, Callum knew something had to happen and soon, else...

Callum stopped playing with his wedding ring and stood up. Brooding didn't help his situation so he made a quick dash to the gents' and took a few deep breaths along the way to clear his head. Work was the last place he wanted to dwell on his personal problems.

He washed his hands and stared at himself in the mirror. *Maybe Bri and I aren't being fair with each other. Fun is fun, but I can't let this go on for too much longer without somebody getting hurt.*



## Chapter Two

Callum's mood matched the cold, grey weather as he trudged into the canteen and joined Brian in line.

"Morning, Callum," Brian said when he saw Callum, still bundled in his damp raincoat. "How are you?"

Something about Brian's bright tone annoyed the hell out of Callum.

"Me head feels like it's been stuffed with cotton that's been pulled through me mouth," Callum replied.

"Sorry about contributing to your delinquency there, mate. Let me buy you my surefire hangover cure. An orange and the largest cup of coffee they have available."

"I'm not sure about the orange, Bri. Me stomach only just settled down about an hour ago."

"It's everything you need right now. Vitamins, fluids and caffeine."

"The only thing that'll help right now is a bullet between me eyes."

"Trust me." Brian picked up an orange and handed it to Callum. "The orange and coffee, coupled with a small handful of aspirin, and you'll be feeling yourself in no time."

"I'd retort but me brain hasn't caught up with the rest of me."

Brian was right. Two hours later, Callum was seeing and thinking more clearly, which pleased him to no end; earlier, he'd tried reading the same sentence in a productivity report four times before he had to quit. He wasn't sure if he would be able

to keep anything more than a cheese sandwich down for lunch; the thought of food made him queasy again. Callum took a deep breath, then ate another piece of orange before trying to tackle the productivity report once again.

Callum's concentration must have been better than he'd expected, because he didn't notice when Natalie stopped at his desk with another stack of files. "Callum?"

"Oh. Hallo, Natalie. I'm sorry. I din't hear ye."

"That's quite all right. Mr. Fairmerchant just asked me to deliver these to you."

"Thanks, Natalie. I'll have them by the end of the day, as usual."

"Have a nice time last night at the Feather and Larch?" Natalie asked as she handed him the files.

Callum didn't buy it, but decided to play along. "It was all right."

"I happened by as you and Brian were going in."

"Well, we had a very nice time, thanks. It was a good diversion for a Tuesday evening."

"Nick and I usually don't like to go out during the week. It's just such a pain having to keep an eye on the clock, I can't relax."

"I don't do it much, meself, but I needed the break."

"Was that your first time there?"

"Aye, never been before."

"I've heard Brian talk about it. Is it nice?"

"As far as pubs go, aye. A bit smaller than what I'm used to, but it works." Callum began to wonder if she was going the direction he hoped she wasn't.

"So you had no...problems going in?"

The rotten little cow. Why shouldn't she broach the subject? "No, none at all. Why? Do ye think I should?"

"Well, no, it's just one of Brian's favorite pubs and I just thought..."

"It was a nice pub, Natalie. Bri was kind enough to invite me out fer a pint. Nothing unsavory happened to me whilst I was there. Even if it did, it wouldn't be any of yer business now, would it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"No, I beg yers, Natalie. I don't appreciate yer nosing around in me affairs. Bri and I are friends and if ye can't accept that there's nothing I can say or do." Callum's hands began to shake and his stomach began to knot up, but he was on a roll and didn't feel like stopping, hangover be damned. "I'm perfectly capable of making me own decisions about who I speak to, where I go and who buys me a pint. Ye've taken it upon yerself to check on me personal welfare every time ye see us having a laugh and enjoying ourselves. I don't know what he's telling ye, but I'm telling ye to please kindly refrain from asking me about me personal life in the future. I'll gladly assist ye with work, but details of me life outside the front door are off limits unless I volunteer them."

"Yes, Callum." Natalie's face turned red with anger as she left Callum's desk.

"One more thing before ye leave, Natalie?"

Natalie stopped and turned around. "Yes, Callum?"

"Nobody likes a tattle-tale, yeah?" With an actual huff, Natalie turned and left. If she'd stomped her foot before, it would have completed the picture in Callum's head of her behaving like a ten-year-old being told St. Nick hadn't left a pony.

Only not as mature.

*Some people have the nerve.*

\* \* \* \*

Natalie stopped at Brian's desk. "Brian, may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly, Natalie."

"Are you aware of anything bothering Callum? I just asked him about his night out last evening and all I got was a lecture on minding my own business."

Brian thought for a moment and shook his head. "No, I don't think so. He was his usual pleasant self this morning in the canteen."

If the little nit was so stupid as to piss off Callum while he was hung over, it was her own funeral.

"Well, I was just a bit surprised to see him going into the Feather and Larch with you last night."

"And you were worried what strangers on the street would think."

"Well, not so much as the others who work for this firm."

Brian pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

"Natalie. Please. Whatever Callum told you goes double for me." He released his nose and opened his eyes. "I would kindly appreciate a moratorium on the questions about my personal life. If I need to discuss my goings-on outside these walls, you'll certainly be among the first I tell. Now, we're both rather busy today and I have nothing further to add, so I hereby declare the matter closed."

"Fine. Just asking a simple question and letting you know about some concerns I have."

Brian looked up again. "Oh. Are you still here?"

"Just leaving," Natalie replied and stormed back to her desk.

Brian wouldn't give her the satisfaction. Out of the corner of his eye, he could tell Natalie was watching him, but he refused to acknowledge her presence. Why bother? It would only make the situation more tense and as far as he was concerned, it was over. He relaxed his jaw; he was grinding his teeth and wanted to avoid a headache, so he rubbed the back of his neck. Would going to the Feather and Larch just one more night in a row really make him a raging alcoholic like the headmaster at St. Apollonaria's Academy for the Terribly, Terribly Clever always warned him it would, or would it just make him a normal human being with a screaming need to drink himself into numbness? Of course, it would have been cheaper to make a quick dash into the off license next to his Tube stop.

Go home, get drunk and pass out in the comfort of his own flat.

Maybe he was overreacting to the situation and what he really needed was a good curry takeaway (which was conveniently located next to the off license next to his Tube stop). Just a little time alone to ground himself. Maybe turn on the radio instead of the television, for once.

*That's it. Just go home, shut out the world and just simply be for a few hours.* Let the miasma sort itself out and everything will be all bright and glowing and rosy in the morning.

"Sounds heavenly," Callum said about Brian's idea during lunch. "If only I could be as lucky. It's our monthly dinner with Theresa's parents and there's no way I'm able to get out of it."

"Actually, it would be rather nice if I had such an engagement to worry about. I need a break in the monotony I've seemed to have developed over the last year."

"Ye'd think Natalie provides enough excitement fer one day."

"Don't remind me. We've made it this far without Fairmerchant stopping by for a chat."

"I don't believe her gumption, getting all huffy like that."

"That's the life of a nosy person. We've taken away her reason to live."

"Now she'll have to find somebody else in the office to bother."

"Seeing as Wanda is pretty much her only friend left here, it'll be rather difficult."

"And they probably know everything about each other already."

"It's sad, really, having to gossip about your coworkers."

"Yes, innit." Callum stopped and looked over at Brian, who returned the glance with a smirk and a snort of laughter.

"Maybe we've taken away her reason to live."

Brian noticed the sparkle in Callum's huge brown eyes as he laughed. It always looked like Callum was thinking something naughty; Brian hoped so. He needed to find a way to stop concentrating so much on Callum; otherwise, he'd never be able to function in polite society again.

The next morning, Brian arrived at his desk a bit earlier than usual. He'd lucked out because his train had fewer passengers, which made it easier to get on or off. Natalie was nowhere to be seen, thank God, though she'd dumped several files into his in basket and made her presence felt. He'd just sat down and started to arrange things for

the day when Fairmerchant stopped by his desk. "Mr. Parker-Eddy, may I see you for a moment?"

"Certainly. Here or in your office?"

"Here's fine." Fairmerchant paused for a moment. "Mr. Parker-Eddy, what exactly did you say to Miss Rodgers yesterday?"

*Terrific. The playground snitch strikes again.*

"I just made it perfectly clear that I was rather upset with her questions prying into my personal life and my friendship with Mr. MacInnes and that I would appreciate her no longer asking."

"I see. So, you were...straightforward, a little blunt."

"Yes, rather so, but no foul language occurred, I can assure you."

"I see," Fairmerchant repeated. "No, I wasn't worried about your language. You've always kept it rather clean since you'd started. Well, she insisted I speak to you about what happened. And I have. Good morning, Mr. Parker-Eddy."

"Good morning, Mr. Fairmerchant." Fairmerchant nodded and went off on his way. When he was gone, Brian began to laugh. Yes, Fairmerchant had been honest when he said he'd mention the incident. Couldn't fault him for keeping his word. That should keep the little bitch's mouth shut for a while. At least until she found another angle to try and weasel information out of Brian and Callum.

Brian walked over to Callum's desk. He felt a sudden urge to put his arms around him from behind and kiss his ear. Brian could feel his arms moving in that direction and even caught himself about to bend over. He took two steps forward before he stopped what could have been the biggest embarrassment of his entire life.

Just as well; Callum was on the phone.

"Yeah, yeah, I will," Callum said as he turned his chair around. He spotted Brian and waved hello. "Don't worry, Theresa. I'll do it. Take care now. Bye." He hung up the phone and faced Brian again. "So. Did Fairmerchant talk to ye about our unfair behavior toward Miss Rodgers?"

"Yes, he mentioned it to me."

"We're awful, aren't we?"

"Total beasts."

"How long did he talk to ye?" Callum asked as he stood.

"A minute and thirty seconds, tops. You?"

"A minute and forty-five."

"He gave you a right tongue-lashing, then."

"I'm just glad this whole business is done. All this snippy little gossip floating about the office was beginning to wear me down."

"Well, I'm willing to let it drop. Less of us bitching about Natalie sticking her nose where it doesn't belong and more of me telling you how incredibly handsome you are."

"And may I return the compliment, sir?" Callum asked with a courtly bow.

"Well, you haven't before, but thank you." Brian returned the bow and hoped Callum couldn't see he was blushing like a mad man.

*Where the hell did that come from? Usually, he simply accepts without reciprocation. I must say, it's nice to hear.*

Callum gestured in the direction of the men's room. "I need to visit the gents', so I'll meet ye down in the canteen, okay?"

"Sure. I'll see you in a few minutes." Brian replied as he went to the lifts.

*Careful there, old man. As much fun as this is, we don't need a repeat of Paul Rosen, do we?*

## Chapter Three

The rain was relentless the week Callum went on holiday with Theresa. Without a playmate at work, Brian had to be content and read the newspapers during tea breaks and lunch (like many, he considered himself "above" the tabloids, reading the *Guardian* on the train every morning and the *Times* every evening. But, like many, he could be found reading the *Mirror*, the *Daily Sun*, or *People* during lunch. Sometimes all three, like during weeks Callum had off from work). There were only so many times he could read about the scurrilous charges of infidelity against another reality show "celebrity." He took a certain glee in the fact that an email friend in the United States replied "Who? What?" to the stories, even though Brian knew he kept up with the latest British news via the Internet.

Brian finally gave up after three days and went to the Feather and Larch for a lunchtime pint and sandwich. It was something to break the dull pound of his coworkers' voices in the canteen, so he decided to replace it at a pub with the dull pound of the latest Kylie Minogue song that sounded like her last three played sideways on the jukebox. Just as his sandwich was delivered, Marty, a perpetual Feather and Larch regular who was always seen drinking but never drunk, sat next to him.

"Fancy seeing you here in the light of day," he said. "It's a bit early for you, isn't it?"

"Just out for lunch, then it's back into my hole I crawl."

"Where's your friend?"



"Who, Callum?" Brian picked up his sandwich and took a bite out of the corner.

"Is that his name? The beardy bloke you brought in a week or so back?"

"He's off on holiday this week, so I'm here all by myself."

"That's too bad. You know, he is rather cute."

"He's married and claims to be hopelessly straight."

"But that doesn't stop you from flirting."

"No, and that's all I do," Brian replied, irritated.

"Get you. I'm only making conversation."

"I'm sorry, Marty," Brian softened his tone, "but I've been through this chapter once before at work. I'm not ready to repeat it."

"I didn't mean any harm. Sorry."

"And I didn't mean to pick a fight. It's been rather...boring at work without Callum around. I don't have anybody to talk to and the silence has been crushing."

"Honestly. I find that hard to believe with your outgoing personality."

"Not on the level I talk with Callum. Our interests are so close, it's scary."

"Why should it be? He's just a friend at work."

"Yes, but I think he knows that I fancy him and I think he's beginning to return the flirtations."

"I don't need to tell you how dangerous that can be."

"Having dated married men in the past, yes."

"Didn't swear off them, though, did you?"

"Obviously not."

"So now you're flirting with a married man at work. Double jeopardy, my son."

"So says the idle chatter."

"Sounds like you need to take him out for a drink and a serious talk."

"I don't want to scare him off."

"You won't. Once you know where he stands, you can tailor conversation to that direction. If he's not interested in your advances, let up on the flirts. Continue to

recommend music and movies to him, but without the comments on the fullness of his buttocks."

"Yeah, it wouldn't be the first time a crush is unrequited." Brian drank half his cider.

"Easy there, son. You don't want to go back to work completely blotto."

"It's just the one pint, Mum."

Marty rubbed Brian's upper arm. "Well, I hope you're feeling a little better now. I have to dash off now. I need to introduce my good friend Mr. Sledgehammer to the jukebox. I swear, if I have to listen to that Kylie song one more time..." He slid off his barstool and walked to the other end of the bar.

"Give it a whack for me, yeah?"

Maybe it was time to clear things up with Callum. The proverbial "worst thing that could happen" was, of course, Callum would say "no" and not want to speak to Brian any longer. Or he could say "aye" and open the door to a whirlwind affair. Which scenario was worse? Brian stared down at his half-eaten sandwich and rubbed his temples, trying to divine an answer. The sandwich refused to cooperate and yielded nothing.

*I hate you.*

Brian still hadn't made up his mind the morning of Callum's return. He could let up a little, but he didn't want Callum to think there was anything wrong. Maybe just be his usual charming self when he saw Callum down in the canteen, do little out of the ordinary. He stepped out of his train and took the escalator up to the street to blend in with the rest of the crowd on their way to their respective places of work.

Across the road from the office, Brian noticed Callum picking up a bunch of flowers from a corner vendor. The look on Callum's face troubled him; it was completely devoid of emotion, something he didn't expect from somebody as they chose flowers. Brian paused and considered crossing the road to greet him, but something about him said "don't touch," so he changed his mind and went into the building.

About ten minutes later, Callum stopped at his desk. "Hallo, Bri."

"Welcome back, stranger. How was the trip?"

"Could have been better, unfortunately. Theresa and I had a huge fight on the drive home last night."

"Ouch."

"Yeah. We were both still stewing this morning when I left, so I stopped across the road to pick up these."

Brian noticed the bouquet that Callum had brought in. "Why, you shouldn't have," he said, clasping his hands in glee. "Ah, well. It really is very sweet of you to surprise your wife like that."

The glow about Callum faded. "What surprise? This is to apologize fer last night."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"No, I know ye din't mean anything by it. I probably would've wound up telling ye about it at lunch." The light in his eyes completely faded as he looked down at the roses. Callum winked and pointed them at Brian for emphasis. "Never fall in love, Bri. There are times where it seems like there isn't enough roses in the world to cover yer arse."

Brian patted Callum's shoulder and resisted every urge to hug him. "I'll keep it in mind."

"Sorry fer the gloom and doom. Ye would think that after five years, things would be easier. I thought I had it figured out, but..." He trailed off with a chuckle. "I guess I din't."

"I know we said we were going to go out for a pint after you returned, but we can skip it tonight, if need be."

"Aye. Hope ye don't mind." Callum held up the roses once again. "I just hope she likes these. I can't remember if she prefers the red or the yellow."

"Roses from a handsome gent? Who cares what color they are?" Brian said as he adjusted Callum's tie.

"I'm blushing."

"I know."

"Thanks for understanding. About tonight."

"I'll get over it. You need to smooth things over with Theresa. But if you need me, you know where I'll be."

"Thanks again. Well. I need to go put these in the refrigerator. See ye later, yeah?" Callum gave Brian a friendly pat on the shoulder before he walked down the hall to the break room.

"Of course. Give us a ring if you need to." The hurt look in Callum's eyes made Brian wonder if he had just glossed over details but decided to leave it up to Callum to say something first. And he wasn't certain he could bring up what was going on between them. Callum was already loaded down with enough emotional turmoil. Brian crossed his arms and walked to his desk.

*Maybe I am getting too attached emotionally. I simply can't be throwing myself at every guy just because he's nice to me.* He sat down and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. *God, what the hell have I talked myself into?*

He took a deep breath, removed his hands, exhaled and settled in for the morning's grind.

\* \* \* \*

Callum found an open space in the refrigerator so he put the roses in and shut the door. He smiled as he walked to his desk, unable get over the attention Brian was paying him. The flirting got to be quite silly at times, but Callum felt he could be open with Brian. Theresa was just too cold and distant lately, his parents were off to Nova Scotia for three months, and contact with his brother had always been sporadic.

Still, maybe it was those beautiful blue eyes...

Damnit. No. Not again. Callum thought he'd gotten over his feelings for Brian, but they seemed to resurface. Just what he needed. Maybe he had read Brian's friendly overtures incorrectly. Maybe he was wrong about what he felt for Brian. Maybe the sky would just fall on his head.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, Brian didn't want to admit to himself how gorgeous it was outside, but his heart eventually softened. He regretted having to work indoors on such a beautiful day as he stopped at the receptionist to pick up his mail. In his slot, there was a phone message from Callum: "Out today. Will meet you after work." Maybe it was the short, terse way the message was worded, but it didn't bode well. He wondered what was up as he folded it in half and tucked it into his breast pocket as he walked to his desk.

Of course, since it was the morning after Callum attempted to apologize to his wife Brian could only speculate everything had gone pear-shaped as he stood in line for lunch. Exactly what Callum needed.

*Crap, hell, bugger and pants. I really should be prepared for the worst. Or maybe he and Theresa have had a breakthrough and he didn't want to be out of her sight for more than a few minutes.*

Brian spotted Callum leaning against the bus shelter as he left work. His hands were thrust in his denim jacket's pockets, and while clean, his clothes looked even more rumpled than usual.

*Maybe everything has gone all pear shaped.*

"Hallo, Bri," Callum said, his voice a little slurred. He tried to smile but the effort looked strained. "I see ye got me message."

"Yeah, sure. What's up?"

"Oh, the sky's come crashin' down on me head, is all." Callum sighed, his breath in ragged sheets. "Theresa's leavin' me. I'm leavin' Theresa. We're leavin' each other."

"Shit," Brian muttered, then threw decorum to the wind and hugged him.

"Can we go down to the Feather and Larch? I'm buyin'," Callum said and sniffled back some tears.

Brian ignored the slight reek of alcohol that said Callum'd had a head start. But with the news he'd just dropped at Brian's feet, the poor bloke needed to get as wrecked as possible. "Yeah. Of course. Come on."

The short walk down to the pub was silent, the two surrounded by the sounds of the rest of the city dashing to catch the next bus, running down the stairs to the train or calling a mate on a cell phone. They melted into the scenery, hardly noticed by those around them. At the pub, Callum draped his jacket over a barstool and sat down while Brian signaled the landlord. "Two pints cider, please."

Callum crossed his arms and stared at his bar mat. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. We've threatened it enough back and forth."

"I hadn't realized it was that bad."

"I din't want to jinx it or anything. I figured we could work things through fer ourselves. I din't want ye to worry about me. I know ye've go' a lo' going on in yer life without a work mate's troubles interfering."

"Who says you'd be interfering? You obviously think enough about me to leave cryptic messages for me to meet you after work."

"Sorry about tha'. I was afraid Natalie would see it and pester ye all day."

"Thank God, she didn't. So," Brian said as their drinks were delivered, "have you been able to find a place to stay?"

"I'm sleeping in the spare room until we...work out details." Callum laughed a little and took a sip of his cider. "Awkward doesn't e'en begin to describe it."

"Separate rooms, separate lives?"

"Almost. I don't think she'd appreciate me bringing somebody home." Callum scoffed. "Like tha's going to happen any time soon."

"It's too soon to think about that."

Callum faced Brian. "Let me ask ye a question, Bri. Brutally honest answer. Do ye fancy me in any way? Don't worry about hurting or surprising me. Considering the day I've had, nothing'll knock me down."

"Well, yeah." Brian hid behind his glass. "You know that I do. You're a decent bloke, and..."

"Not that 'work mate' codswallop, Bri. I'm talking about do ye *fancy* me?"

"Wow, Callum. How much have you had to drink today?"

"Enough to fortify me reserve and numb me nerves. Come on." Callum leaned a little closer. "I think ye've always been honest with me. Tell me now."

"Yeah. In some way, I have."

"I knew it. I knew there had to be something behind yer flirting. E'en Theresa could see it. And she mentioned it." He almost drained his glass in one drink. "Laird, she mentioned it. I swear, Bri, she was keeping score how many times I said yer name after I go' home from work or how much more I talked to ye at company gatherings than to her. I just couldn't get her to understand."

"I'm sorry, Callum. I didn't know."

"I don't blame ye, Bri. It's no' yer fault Theresa thinks yer Bri the Amazing, Bri the Fascinating. She came up with tha' by herself."

"Sorry for being such a good friend."

Callum laughed a little and emptied his glass, then held it up to signal for another. "I began to feel I couldn't have any other mates than her. Like marriage automatically made her me only mate. I don't know, Bri. I tried everything I could think of. Hell, I e'en considered inviting her along that first night I came here with ye. Just to get her involved and let her see what a nice bloke ye are." Callum took his drink and handed the landlord some money. "E'en if ye get all weird about yer damned pants."

Brian finally laughed. "Look, now that you know how I feel about you, I hope it doesn't have any effect on our friendship. If it makes you uncomfortable, especially now, I'm willing to let up. I always have been. I just figured you'd let me know if I crossed the line."

"No, Bri. Ye ne'er did. There are times where I think I e'en encouraged it. I responded enough to yer email and yer winks and waves across the hall." Callum took a more conservative sip of his pint. "What started it?"

"I don't know. Probably when I first met you. I held back until I'd gotten to know you a little more and figured you'd take it as a lark."

"Maybe I din't."

Brian's stomach shrank. "Beg pardon?"

"Maybe I din't take it as a lark. Maybe I thought ye were serious when ye first started."

"Well...I mean..." Brian paused. "You seemed to laugh it off like you knew I was kidding."

"I wanted to respond but I couldn't, Bri," Callum said, a small catch in his voice. "Ye know what a cesspool of gossip tha' place is."

"I see."

"Bri, since ye were honest with me, I have to be honest with ye. This may be the cider talking and I'll probably regret saying this. I'll probably regret it e'en more fer no' saying anything, but here goes." Callum took a deep breath, exhaled noisily and rubbed his hands over his face. "Bri, I honestly think I fancy ye back."

"Oh, Jesus," Brian leaned his elbow against the edge of the bar.

*This is exactly how everything with Paul Rosen started.*

"Again, considering the shock I've been put through o'er the last day and how much cider I've had, I can only say I think. I don't know. I could wake up sober tomorrow and say the opposite." Callum turned away and stared at the portrait of the Queen that hung over the back of the bar. "But I'd be a bald-faced liar if I did."

"So. Where to from here, then?"

"Up to ye, I guess."

"You do realize you're still a married man..."

"I've thought about it enough, believe me. I'd noticed...things when I was growing up, but figured I was o'er them when I'd met Theresa. She was the first girl I'd met that I thought would help me jus' stop, but these feelings have continued to this day."

"I understand you're about to take a huge step in your life, Callum, but are you absolutely sure about this?"



"Aye, Bri. The divorce is coming at a convenient time and I'm absolutely positive this is what I want. If I weren't married, I would have responded much earlier."

"We can't rush into this, you know."

"I din't expect to wake up back at yer place tomorrow morning. I think I'm too drunk to function properly, anyway."

Brian faced Callum again and took his hand. "When your head is clear enough, think about it," he said, soaking in the warmth of Callum's skin. "I'm not expecting an answer tomorrow, but think about how we're going to go about this. As flattered and thrilled I am, I'm not taking complete control over this like I'm your gay guru or anything like that. I want you to take it slowly. Got it?"

"Slowly. Go' it."

"I don't want you to get hurt any more than you already are. We'll go out a few times, find out what's there, if anything. Okay?"

"Okay. Oh, and Bri? One more thing?"

"Sure. What's that?"

"Could ye please move yer feet because I'm about to be horribly, horribly sick and I don't know if I can make it to the gents' in time?" With a horrible groan, Callum lurched forward and vomited on the carpet, Brian barely moving his feet in time.

"Excuse me?" Brian said to the landlord, trying to be as nonchalant as possible. "We have an emergency evacuation down here. And we need some water, as well. Please."

"I'll get the bucket," the landlord said as he threw his bar towel over his shoulder and walked into the back.

Brian held his hand as Callum continued to be violently ill. "Poor bloke." He wasn't sure if Callum had squeezed back in response to his concern or if he was just trying to keep from falling face first into the sick on the floor.

When his nausea had passed, Callum looked up again. Brian still held his hand and the landlord had set a glass of water and several paper napkins on the bar. Callum released Brian's hand, took one of the napkins, dipped it in the water, and wiped his mouth with it. "I swear, Bri. I'm no' tha' cheap a first date."

The landlord noisily dropped a metal bucket on the floor next to Callum's stool. "I trust he's on the way out the door, Brian," he said, more of a statement than a question.

"On the way out."

"Do you know how long it's been since I've had to clean that carpet?"

"From the looks of it, the last ice age?"

"Good *night*, gents."

"I can give another show in about an hour," Callum said as he dabbed a wet napkin on his face.

"Good night, *gents*," the landlord repeated as he knelt down and began to clean up the mess.

Brian grabbed his jacket then helped Callum off his stool, around the puddle and out the door. "If you think it's safe, take a couple deep breaths. Maybe there's some fresh air out here, somewhere," he said as he helped Callum put on his jacket.

"I'm really sorry, Bri," Callum quietly said. "I'm jus' a real mess right now."

"Thankfully, it's Friday. You'll be able to sleep most of it off."

"Didge..." Callum started, slurring his words even more, the alcohol taking its final toll on his system. "Didge want get togesser nest weekend? Jus' ye and me. I need get me head togesser, so I don' esspect an answer right away."

"I'll think about it."

"All I ask. I'll be out of the office until Wednesday, so lemme know then, 'k?"

"I will."

"And some ideas what ye'd like t'do. I haven't been on a date in years, so I'm a tad rusty."

"We'll come up with something."

"Bri?"

"Yes?"

"Can ye make this street stop spinning? Me head's going clockwise and the street's going anti."

Brian moved closer to the curb and hailed a passing taxi. "Let's get you home, Callum."

"Bri, if I hadn't just heaved, I'd kiss ye for being such a gent," Callum said as the cab stopped.

Brian chuckled as he opened the door. "Save it for next weekend."

Callum took a step into the cab, then stopped. "Bri? Thanks."

Brian looked into Callum's hurt and troubled eyes. "You'll be fine. Don't forget my hangover cure." Brian gave Callum a small peck on the cheek.

Callum put his hand over his cheek and smiled. "Thanks again." He leaned forward, gave the driver his address and as the car drove off waved good night to Brian through the rear window.

Brian stood on the curb and waved as he watched the cab drive away. When it was gone, he put the palm of his hand on his head and grabbed a handful of hair, then yanked at it with a grimace.

*What the hell have I done?*

"Jesus," he said out loud to no one and nothing in particular before he walked toward his Tube station. As he walked, he remembered a prayer that he recited often at school, a little supplication that always brought him solace during the darkest times (*and at St. Apollonaria's Academy for the Terribly, Terribly Clever, that seemed to be on an hourly basis*): "Dear Sweet Jesus God, don't let me fuck this one up."

To score extra points, Brian dropped a two-pound piece in the religious nut's hat outside the station. Anything to help answer his prayer.

## Chapter Four

Brian whistled a cacophonous tune of early Wednesday morning guilt as he stood in line at the men's department register of M&S. The night before, he'd realized he didn't have quite the right color of purple unders. He had purple, but he needed something more in the blue-purple scheme than the red-purple that dominated his collection. After he paid, he left the store and decided not to stash the bag in his lunch sack.

*Why break tradition? It can't be a good morning unless Brian comes in to work with his M&S bag!*

Things were left in an awful lurch over the weekend, as Callum had gone to a conference and was due to return that morning. During the time Callum was gone, Brian thought about where they stood and hoped Callum hadn't changed his mind while he was gone. He felt his worries were unfounded when he saw Callum outside the front door.

Callum smiled and waved after he'd spotted Brian's irresistible blue eyes and grey hair in the crowd. "Oh, Bri," he said after he saw the familiar white and green plastic bag. "Ye din't."

Brian shook the bag in his hand. "Good God, how did that get there? I swear, I didn't have that when I got on the train this morning." He looked into Callum's eyes; most of the pain from the week before was gone, but there were still traces. "How was Birmingham?"

"It was Birmingham. I don't know why I got so excited when I was asked to attend this year."

"A good way to impress the boss, build foundations to a stronger team environment, learn new training technique..."

"Blah, blah, order room service on the company's tab."

"How are you feeling today?"

"Me head's clearer. Fairmerchant should send me to Birmingham fer company conferences more often. It gave me a chance to calm down and think. When I came home yesterday afternoon, Theresa and I talked and decided we can be mature adults, so we'll be leaving the name calling to the solicitors. We have our first court date in two weeks."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Everybody's parents are devastated. Hers, especially. They've condemned her to perdition's flames, conveniently forgetting her younger sister's hobby of collecting alimony." Callum sighed. "Now comes the hard part. Telling me parents about...ye know."

The lift car arrived so Callum and Brian entered. "Make sure you hold your breath before you jump in."

"And me brother's going to have a fit when he hears this, if at all. It'll be one of his greatest victories. I can hear him now. 'Ye see? I always told ye he was a big homo!' I spent too much time thinking about the conference, Theresa, ye, and meself while I was in Birmingham. Mostly, I was thinking about meself."

"That's good to hear."

"All that thinking kept me distracted and away from the pubs."

The lift doors opened so Callum and Brian walked down the hall to the canteen. "Listen to the master," Brian continued. "You're going to need your faculties for the next few months and any decisions you make while drunk will come back to bite you in the arse when you least expect it."

"Trust me, Bri. I'm not about to repeat me little performance at the Feather and Larch."

"But it was such an intriguing shade of ick."

"It's not me idea of attracting attention or making new friends."

"Well, at least the landlord loves you."

"Any thought to this weekend? I'm still looking forward to going out with ye." He took a cup and chuckled. "'Going out with ye'. Heavens above, I'm eighteen again and I'm 'going out.'"

"Lord, I haven't been out on a date in a long time, either," Brian said thoughtfully. He held out a cup for Callum to pour.

"Any special rules of etiquette ye should tell me?"

"Relax. It's easier than you'd think."

"So ye say. Ye've got how many years of experience on me?"

"You're lucky. I had to do it on a learn-by-doing program. Now, remember: I'll be a good reference, but I don't want you taking everything I say as gospel. I'm incredibly fallible so I can give you the numbers of some great helplines, if you need them."

"Maybe later. I'd much rather have a mate help me muddle through this. I wouldn't be comfortable talking to a stranger."

Brian stopped. "I'm touched. Thanks, Callum." He felt privileged to have a good friend dependent on him in a time of crisis. "But you did the same for me, so I owe you karma."

"I hope ye don't mind. Ye've always told me ye believe in paying it back."

"Not at all. It's the strongest rule I have for myself. That, and making sure the seat's down, no matter whose loo I'm using."

"So, have ye given any thought to Saturday?"

"Well, if it's all right with you, I kept thinking about heading out to G.A.Y. Saturday night. They've got an amazing dance floor and it's their eighties' retro flashback extravaganza. I'd already planned on going before...this happened, so if you'd like..."

"Dancing?" Callum asked nervously. "I don't know, Bri. I haven't been in years."

"We don't have to. I just thought you might want to at least go for the music."

"It's a bit much, but I'm warning ye ahead of time, ye'll have to lead. I was thinking of something a little more...sedate. It's the last weekend of the Japanese silks display at the British Museum and I'd love to see it."

"That sounds excellent. I'd been wanting to go, as well."

"I love Japanese art," Callum said as they got off the lift at their floor. "Especially the ghost stories. And I love the dragons. Their ferocity and strength are just beautiful to look at."

"Should we try both?"

"Are ye game?"

"Yeah. If you'd like to, I mean. This is your grand day out, after all."

*Maybe this doesn't have to be a repeat of the Paul Rosen affair, after all. Maybe I won't become such an emotional mess.*

"Sure. As long as we go Dutch, yeah?"

"Of course. But the first one caught singing along buys the second round."

\* \* \* \*

Callum lay in bed and stared at the ceiling for most of the night. He was completely exhausted from his impending divorce and his recent business trip, but he still couldn't get to sleep. One detail kept nagging him awake: his first date with Brian was the next morning. It'd been ages since he'd asked another bloke out, for Christ's sake! Callum swore that he had broadcast it to Theresa in the next room and at any second, she was going to burst in with her solicitor, his parents and his brother.

He turned onto his side as tears burned in his eyes. He felt like a total, absolute failure. At everything. Callum wanted to blame Brian for part of it, though. Especially for being such a nice bloke with his flirting. Totally rude language, but always such a gentleman. Of course, it was also easy to blame the way his blue eyes lit up or the way

his smile turned Callum's knees to jelly or the way his brilliant silver hair caught the sun. But there wasn't any blame.

*Things change. So do people. Callum wiped the tears from his eyes. It just...happens. No use beating meself up over it. I've to got move on, and I only hope Theresa has somebody like Brian she's depending on. I'd hate to see her going through this alone. Nobody deserves that.*

Callum closed his eyes and soon fell asleep, dreaming of a silver Japanese dragon with the clearest blue eyes.

The next morning, Callum donned a pair of jeans and a white shirt he usually wore to work. On habit, he buttoned it up to the collar and had reached for a tie when he realized it was Saturday. Ties were illegal on Saturdays. Laughing, he put it back into the dresser then slipped on his shoes, grabbed his faithful denim jacket, and left the house. Theresa had already gone, which helped Callum relax. Even though it was no longer necessary, he still felt he had to explain his actions to her.

While hardly as posh as Holland Park, Brian's neighborhood was small, quiet and clean. Callum took a quick deep breath as he pressed the security buzzer to Brian's flat. There was a pause, then the door clicked open. Once it had closed behind him, Callum knew he couldn't leave. His first date with Brian was going to happen.

At Brian's door, Callum caught his breath before he knocked. When the door opened, Brian looked out and smiled. His blue eyes shone and their spark reminded Callum of the silver dragon in the dream he had the night before.

*Brian isn't the dragon. Is he?*

"Come on in."

"My God." Callum looked around and tried to get more hints about the man with whom he was about to go out on a date. He indicated Brian's blue jeans and grey polo shirt with a small wave of his hand. "I never realized ye had a casual wardrobe."

"I've been known to wear jeans on occasion," Brian said as he finished off his braid and stepped into his shoes. "Look: trainers without socks. Gasp."

"Now, are ye sure ye're up to this?" Callum hoped he didn't sound as nervous as he felt.



"Callum, you're the one who suggested it."

"I know, Bri, but..."

"We can consider this trip to the British Museum in one of two different ways: two work friends going to the museum or two men going on a date. It's completely up to you how we go about it. Just let me know and I'll behave accordingly."

"There is a third option, ye know."

"Which is?"

"I leave now and vomit in the gutter outside."

"I'd hoped you wouldn't mention it."

"Can we...just go as friends? Start there?"

"Sure."

"Honest?"

"Yes, please. Now, let's go before you do back down completely." Brian grabbed his own denim jacket, which looked worse for the wear. There was a patch on the elbow that was three shades darker than the rest of the jacket, three buttons that advertised various gay and lesbian social events, and a patch over the right breast pocket of a teddy bear waving a rainbow pride flag.

"Bri. That jacket. It's so...not ye."

"My mother would love hearing that. She tries tossing it into the dust bin every time she visits." Brian took his keys from his pocket and showed Callum the door. "Shall we?"

"Thank ye, sir."

At the museum, they bought tickets to the silks exhibit, then toured the rest of the galleries. When they spoke briefly on some of the displays, Callum hoped he remained within the "just friends" boundaries and didn't stand too close or look into Brian's eyes too much or glance at his backside too often. He didn't want to read too much into the silver dragon in the dream he'd had. Instead, Callum found himself distracted by the black hair at Brian's collar.

Their time for the silks display arrived, so they went to the exhibit hall. They'd just stepped in when Callum looked up at the ceiling. "Bloody hell."

A banner of silver silk hung from the ceiling and extended from the front of the hall, to the back, and trailed down an extra ten feet or so. On it was a hand-painted dragon, done in simple black outline.

The only color was its blue eyes.

*Maybe he is?*

Callum glanced up at the dragon banner then back at Brian as he studied a display of Japanese men's garments. Slowly, quietly, Callum reached over and brushed his fingers against Brian's but quickly pulled them away.

*Should I be even doing this?*

He tried again and held Brian's fingers in his in a shy, uncertain grasp. He held on loosely for a few seconds, ready to let go again, then finally wrapped his hand around Brian's with a quiet sigh of relief.

They held hands during the rest of their visit and the conversation slowly warmed to something a little more intimate than the latest gossip about Natalie. However, Callum's guilt almost quashed any fun he'd had at the museum. It had to have been too soon for him to start seeing somebody, but Callum and Brian were just friends. Weren't they?

*But how often do friends hold hands in a museum?*

The longer Callum held Brian's hand, the more the uneasy feeling disappeared. Soon, he felt everything would be just fine and Theresa wasn't about to swoop down on him from nowhere with added accusations of infidelity.

Callum even held Brian's hand on the train ride back to his flat. They stopped on the front walk outside Brian's building. "Well." Callum tried to not look into the crystal blue depths of Brian's eyes and failed. "I had a really nice time today."

"Thanks for suggesting we go. I haven't been there in ages."

"Well, I need to get home. Get changed for later tonight." On instinct, Callum took a step forward but stopped. He wanted to kiss Brian, but he couldn't do it. Not just yet. "Thanks again," he whispered before he dashed off, his face red.

\* \* \* \*

As Brian had expected, G.A.Y. was a total madhouse. Small and densely packed with people younger than both himself and Callum, the club was abuzz with the electricity of a Saturday night. Nobody had made the effort to dress to match the theme, aside from club staff. Either they'd outgrown what gear they had from the era or they were too ashamed to admit they'd worn any of the tat and had thrown it out.

"This is insane," Callum yelled into Brian's ear over the din as Bananarama warned of the dangers of falling in love during a cruel summer.

"It'll be a blast," Brian yelled back. "I just need to wait for the right tune to play and I'll be out on the floor. It's early so they'll play all the familiar stuff before dragging out the oddities and atrocities."

"I'm not sure I'm up for joining ye just yet."

"You can watch from the rail. Just hold my jacket and keep an eye on my drink." Brian gave Callum's hand a reassuring squeeze and Callum returned it. To keep with the theme, Brian bought himself and Callum lemonades. "I wasn't old enough to drink just yet,"

Callum toasted Brian with his glass. "Din't stop me."

"Me, neither." The two walked out to the dance floor. They stood for a while and watched the other patrons, Brian behind Callum with his chin on Callum's shoulder. Every time a song changed, Brian said in a bored tone, "Pass."

"What's wrong?" Callum asked.

"The music's great and all, but so far I own everything they've played." Just then, a familiar, heavy guitar riff rang through the club. "Oh, bloody hell!" Brian exclaimed

when he recognized Jesus and Mary Chain's *Blues from a Gun*. "Come on, Callum. This one."

"Ye're not serious, are ye?"

"Of course. This is a great song. So far, it's the only one I don't hear it very often."

"I'm not sure. Can ye even really dance to it?"

"I can, I have, and I will."

"I don't know." Callum hesitated. "I'm not sure I'm a good enough dancer."

"Suit yourself. Join me later if you want." Brian gave Callum a quick peck on the cheek, put his coat over the rail and dashed out to an empty spot on the floor.

\* \* \* \*

As he watched from the sidelines, Callum couldn't believe how Brian transformed out on the dance floor. He ground his hips to the music's tempo and rolled his torso in a serpentine fashion. Callum had seen his male relatives and friends dance at weddings and nights out, but they all seemed to flail about, trying to find the music. Not Brian; he felt it and transformed it into an embodiment of passion. It might have been the song, too, the way the guitars pounded and the hushed singing cut into Callum's brain. He knew the song quite well, but the way Brian danced brought a new, sexual dimension to it he didn't know exist.

*Maybe all gay men are just good dancers.* Callum took a sip of his drink.

A twinge of jealousy hit Callum as he watched Brian attract the rest of the pack. Two others, half Brian's age, tried to match his undulations. They didn't have the graceful sleaze Brian projected, especially when they moved so that Brian was between them. One ground his hips against Brian's ass as the other rubbed his ass against Brian's crotch. It didn't work and just broke the magic of Brian's performance. Brian declined his suitors' advances with quick kisses and moved away from them, then turned his attention to Callum.

The second Brian looked at him, Callum saw him in a different light. This wasn't Brian, the coworker who playfully flirted with him. He was now Brian, the bright, vibrant, incredibly sexy man who touched upon an inner desire Callum hadn't felt in ages. He now saw Brian as somebody he could spend a lot of time with.

Maybe not a lifetime, but enough to get into loads of trouble.

The attention embarrassed and thrilled Callum at the same time; he hadn't been singled out for anything ever. Callum imagined he was back at school and it was physical education time. The class was choosing sides for a quick game of football and Brian was one of the team captains. Much to his surprise, Brian chose Callum first.

The song changed to something slow by Madonna and Callum decided he couldn't leave Brian alone any more. Still, it meant he'd have to go out onto the dance floor, put his arms around Brian, and hold him close. How could he do that when he knew everybody in the club was watching him because he had a wife at home? His heart beat frantically as he set his glass on the rail next to Brian's coat then joined Brian.

"Thanks for joining me," Brian said as he put his arms around Callum's waist.

"No trouble." Callum put his hands on Brian's shoulders, his black t-shirt soaked with sweat.

Brian pulled Callum closer. "Go ahead."

Callum caught the electricity in his eyes and put his arms around Brian's shoulders. "Like that?"

"Perfect," Brian whispered and slid his hands up Callum's back. "Just follow my movement. It's a nice, slow song, so it'll be easy to dance to."

"It's a nice, slow, *romantic* song," Callum corrected. "Ye've been waiting for something like this, haven't ye?"

"Yes. A little."

"It's okay. I don't mind."

As they danced, Callum noticed how Brian felt against him. He tried to get lost in the moment and hold on to the warmth they shared, but he couldn't ignore how Brian was shaped. Callum couldn't help it, and his anxiety caused him to laugh.

"Are you okay?" Brian asked.

"Aye, I'm fine."

"Not embarrassed, are you?"

"Not much, anyway."

"All right, then." Brian closed his eyes and tried to get lost in the moment but Callum laughed again. "What is it?"

Callum held Brian out at arms' length. "I'm sorry, Bri. I din't mean anything by it. It's just...well...ye've got bumps."

"I've got...?" Brian started to ask.

"Well, yer bumps are different than what I'm used to."

"I'm guessing you don't mean my keys or wallet."

Callum's eyes glistened with tears. "I'm sorry, Bri. I din't want to ruin the moment. I'm just not used to...bumps."

"Well, Theresa has 'bumps,' hasn't she?"

"Aye, but they're girl bumps."

"What were you expecting?"

"Well, since ye wear those skimpy pants, I wasn't expecting everything to be so prominently displayed."

"It's all supported by my briefs, not tucked away for safe keeping." He put his hands on either side of Callum's face. "Trust me. If you remember anything at all from the locker room at school, you're going to find many more men who are more prominently displayed than I."

"I know, Bri, but have a heart. This is the first time in ages I've been this intimate with another bloke's bumps."

Brian pulled Callum close to finish the dance. "What did you expect it to be like

"I don't know. Less bumpy, I guess."

"There's that word again." Brian kissed Callum's neck.

"Bri? Do that some more?" Callum asked with a sigh.

"Like this?" Brian kissed Callum's neck, starting just under his ear lobe and moving down to his shoulder.

"Bri?"

"Yes?"

"I'm getting bumpier."

## Chapter Five

The day dawned bright and sunny, nary a cloud in the sky, but the cheer escaped Brian. He felt as if his feet dragged through wet cement as he made his way through the staff canteen and trudged pitifully up to his desk. "Some things just need to be done," he reminded himself as he removed his denim jacket and hung it on the hook behind his desk. Natalie was in, doing her usual morning routine. Brian gritted his teeth and stopped at Natalie's desk.

"Natalie, Callum will be out the rest of the week on personal business, so Mr. Fairmerchant has asked that I cover his urgent work, okay?"

"Certainly, Brian." Natalie pulled some files from a stack and handed them to Brian. "I hope he's doing well."

Brian checked the contents of one of the folders. "Under the circumstances, he's fine."

"Should we think about getting him a card or sending some flowers?"

"This is hardly a noteworthy occasion, so I don't think such a gesture will be appreciated."

"That's too bad. Well, if you see him, give him my best."

"Certainly, Natalie. I'll do that. And thanks again for the files." Brian and went back to his desk. After he sat down, he closed the folder he'd been reading. To make certain Callum had his privacy, Brian didn't mark his diary, which he'd kept open on his



desktop. However, the date had been etched into his memory since Callum had told him: This week, Callum and Theresa were due in divorce court.

Brian couldn't imagine the pain and humiliation Callum would be going through. His own break-ups were difficult to deal with, but having to stand in a courtroom... He checked his watch and measured the current time against the stacks of work on his desk.

*If I play it just right, I'll be able to hit the train and catch Callum as they're leaving. Poor bloke's got to wait in that courtroom all ruddy day. Having to sit next to your soon-to-be ex-wife with only your solicitors as a buffer has got to be taking its toll.*

Hours later, Brian checked his watch again. He worked through lunch, bringing up a sandwich and a can of Coke to eat at his desk, and managed to clear his plate with plenty of opportunity to catch a train out to the court. He secured his work and his desk, then removed his jacket from its hook and walked over to Natalie's desk. "Mr. Fairmerchant knows," he said as he put on his jacket, "but I'm finished with what you gave me earlier today so I'll be ducking out early. If you run across any more of Callum's urgent work, please put it in my in basket, okay?"

"Yes, Brian."

"I'll be in at my usual time tomorrow morning for the full day. See you then."

"Good night."

Brian passed another religious nutter in the Tube waiting room, so he dropped a two-pound coin in his hat. He wondered what was next as he took the escalator down to the platform for his train. While Callum said he was willing to continue seeing Brian, he didn't want to overstep any boundaries. Brian had helped plenty of friends over the years with their break-ups, but he had never had to deal with anything on the scale of a divorce. He began to steel himself for the darkest of moods as his train arrived and he stepped in.

Taking a train usually afforded Brian plenty of time to think in tense situations, but this subject stumped him. He wanted to sound supportive of Callum, yet at the same time respectful of Theresa in case she happened to be in range. Nothing to go on. He

couldn't prepare himself, so he decided to improvise and try reading the mood at the courts.

At his stop, Brian took the escalator up to the street and looked around for the court building. It was easy to spot: he saw Callum shaking the solicitors' hands, then shook Theresa's. Theresa retreated in one direction, the solicitors (suddenly chummy and best of friends) retreated in the opposite. Callum was left by himself on the steps. Brian crossed the road as quickly as afternoon traffic permitted and made his way to the courts.

Callum spotted him and walked down the rest of the steps with a small wave. "Hallo, Bri," he said, his voice quiet. "Thanks fer coming out."

Brian squeezed Callum's shoulder. "How are you holding up?"

"Rather well, considering. It took forever to call our case, and when it finally was called, it was over in a flash." He held up his copy of the proceeding documents. "I'm fairly certain it's me signature on there, but I don't remember signing anything."

"Come on," Brian whispered. "Let's get you out of here."

Callum's tone sounded incredibly subdued, a little flat. "Would ye mind if I came back to yer place for a bit? I'm not sure I can go back home right now."

"Sure. Stay for supper, if you like."

"Bless ye, sir. If I had to eat one more vending machine fruit pie, I would have wept bitter tears of frustration."

"Anything in particular you'd care for tonight? There's a Buy & Leave mini mart near my flat and we can stop on the way."

"Damn, but if I haven't got a sudden craving fer proper oatmeal. No idea where that came from."

"That's just your body reacting to today's turmoil. It needs a little reassurance from the vending machine treats you've been shoveling into it all day and oatmeal's probably just the thing. Help settle your stomach and get some real food into you. Besides, it's quick, it's easy, and I can make enough to choke Her Majesty's Royal Guard in under an hour. Let us away." As they entered the station, Brian wished he felt as confident as he'd

sounded; the only thing he remembered about "proper" oatmeal was the image of a tin of the stuff on a cooking show he'd watched one dreadful summer night in the hope dull television would help him sleep. The maritime report just around dawn finally did it and caused him to miss the spectacular thunderstorm that finally broke the heat wave.

"I really appreciate this, Bri. Thanks again."

"Of course, Callum. You've been through hell today."

"If I didn't have to sit for six hours in the courts today, it would've been six hours sitting at work, worrying about what's happening next. Now that it's over, my mind's almost a complete blank."

A train arrived at the platform so they stepped in. "Almost?"

"Well, aside from the usual: have I paid my license fee for the TV and radio, when can I expect to be poisoned by the milk at home, will the sandwich I left in the fridge at work survive until next week..." Callum paused for a moment. "Ye."

"Really. What about me?"

"Just the usual: how great ye're being right now, our night at G.A.Y. and yer bumps."

"What about them?"

"Just...that ye have them."

"Are they an obstacle for you?"

"No, Bri. I've got a whole lot of adjusting to do right now."

"You seem to be handling it rather well."

"I guess Theresa and I have done enough crying. Today seemed to be a foregone conclusion for the longest time, but neither of us wanted to admit it."

"So, now that it's...done..." Brian started.

Now that it's done, I guess all I can do is pick up and move forward. After feeling like a failure for the longest time, I've counted my blessings and realized I'd be worse off if today hadn't happened. Theresa would still be miserable and if I continued carrying on with ye whilst still married to her, I'd be a nervous wreck."

"But now?"

Now, I'm just nervous." Callum smiled a little. "Maybe now that I'm single again, I can relax and enjoy meself more."

"If my bumps don't put you off."

"I'm sure they're quite attractive, but I just need to resolve meself to the fact that some day, I'll be waking up next to an extra set of gents' plumbing in me bed."

"I think everybody has a long period of adjustment. When I was just starting to understand the attraction, I never figured I'd have to get used to how another man functioned. I just thought his would be the same as mine. Was I wrong. Different sizes, shapes, colors, textures... Lord, it sounds like I'm talking about settee cushions."

"When did ye first know?"

"When I was about twelve, thirteen years old. I'd started paying extra attention to men's underwear and swim gear in advertisements. I didn't admit it to myself until I was sixteen. You?"

"I suppressed anything I'd felt. Another result of being brought up in a Protestant home is having the fear of God drilled into ye about everything ye do and say made me keep me mouth shut about lots of things whilst I was a child."

"And you'll be treading carefully when and if you tell your parents about your current interest in other men, I suppose."

"Of course. I do, however, intend on giving them some time to take in the reality of me divorce. I'm guessing that in another twenty-five or thirty years, they'll be ready. I couldn't expect it, but it would've been nice to have them here with me. They probably wouldn't have come, anyway."

"I'm guessing they're very Protestant in all matters."

"Father can be, but Mum is quicker to forgive, especially when it comes to me and me brother. Father usually needs a quiet nudge from Mum, but he's always sincere." Callum stared at the trees they passed. "So, not to change the subject, how is our Miss Rodgers taking the radio silence?"

Brian chuckled. "Poor dear probably checked my diary for clues at least three times after I'd left. Get this: she wanted to send some flowers and a card."

"Please tell me ye're lying."

They had reached Brian's building so he opened the front door. "Honest truth. I told her flat out you wouldn't appreciate it."

"Even if I were in a good mood, I wouldn't. Nothing about her seems sincere."

"She can talk Christian concern for her fellow man all she wants. She's only looking for ammunition to use against us."

"I'll never understand why. It's not like we're her supervisors or anything. What could she possibly gain?"

"She can't send cards and flowers to us on our birthdays since I had that information stricken from the staff birthday roster." Brian shook his head. "This was before your time, but whenever somebody had a baby or a wedding or anything that called for a contribution, she would set up this stupid little plastic tree that held folded bills to look like leaves. If I tucked in a simple fiver, she'd sigh loudly like I was the biggest heel on the planet."

"What did ye get if ye din't contribute at all?"

"An even louder sigh, chilly glances and barbed comments in the staff kitchen. 'Yes, it's just too bad not everybody could be generous today.' Fairmerchant finally told her to just stick gumdrops on it. She was horrified until she realized he meant to use gumdrops to decorate the tree instead."

"Thanks for not telling her, Bri. I'm sure if ye had, the news would set land speed records."

Brian opened the door to his flat and showed Callum in. "It's really not my place. I figure, if you want to tell her..."

"No, Bri. I'm shaky enough, thanks. I don't need a sudden swoop of sympathy from the office happiness committee."

"Now. My turn to change the subject. No pressure, but if you feel you need to spend the night, you're more than welcome. You've seen how comfortable the couch is,

so I wouldn't mind if you want to stay. Either way, you aren't leaving without my phone number."

"Bri, that's real generous of ye, but...I think I need to go home tonight. I hope ye aren't upset."

"Not at all. I just figured if you needed some company and were a bit apprehensive about going home, I'd offer before you could ask."

"I'll be fine. I need to get used to being home alone." Callum gave a ragged sigh. "It'll get better, won't it, Bri?"

"I'm sure of it. Maybe not tomorrow, but down the road."

Callum drank the rest of his tea in one gulp. "Promise?"

"Of course. Things can only get better for you."

"God, is this another learning experience? Thanks again, Bri. I know I've said it over and over, but ye're helping me loads better than I could done on me own."

"Which is why you're getting my phone number tonight. I want you to call me if you need to. You don't even really need to. Just call if you feel like it. Except when *EastEnders* is on, okay? I screen all my calls during that time."

"Has anybody ever told ye what an old lady ye are?"

After they'd eaten, they sat on the couch, Brian at one end while Callum sat next to him, rather hesitant at first. After a couple seconds, he moved a little closer and put his head on Brian's shoulder. Brian put his arm around Callum and rubbed his arm. "See? You don't have to be scared."

"I know, but I just want to do it...right."

"Callum, there's no 'right' or 'wrong' way. Just trust your gut feeling. If you want to sit next to me with your head on my shoulder and I'm in a good mood, by all means. If you want to hold my hand in the British Museum, please do so."

"What about at the Tate Modern this Saturday?"

"Even better."

"I'll call for ye around nine then?"

"I'll be ready."

They remained silent for a while before Callum sat up. Slowly, they leaned forward as they closed their eyes. Callum tried not to be shocked or surprised when their lips met and his stomach didn't churn forth its contents. It felt right. It felt nice.

It felt good.

What shocked Callum the most was how soft Brian's lips were against his. He wasn't expecting that. He was expecting something more coarse, more...manly? Just what were manly lips? He sort of figured their mustaches would bristle together, which happened, but the lips? Should they have been more like sandpaper? Callum sat up again, opening his eyes.

"And that was...?" Brian asked with a smile as he rubbed Callum's cheek with the back of his hand, his eyes still closed.

"Just going with a gut reaction." Callum leaned closer for another kiss. Brian opened his mouth a little, the tip of his tongue touching Callum's. Callum moved closer and opened his mouth more, surprised to feel Brian's tongue move completely over his. Callum pulled back with a gasp, then put his hand over his mouth and laughed. "Oh, me God, Bri. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean..."

"What?" Brian opened his eyes.

Callum sat up, wiping tears from his eyes. "It's just...well...I don't know why, but I just had a man's tongue in me mouth."

"You started it."

"I know, Bri, but it was just...it was yer tongue."

"Well, I guess I really shouldn't expect you to overcome your original programming in just one easy lesson."

"I'm willing to try again, Bri," Callum said, settling down a little. "I won't laugh again. I promise."

"Promise?"

Callum crossed his heart.

"Good. My self esteem couldn't take another blow like that." Brian put his lips to Callum's in a friendly, testing kiss. "See? That's all it is."

"Got it," Callum whispered in return.

When they kissed again, Brian carefully moved his tongue forward to touch Callum's. Callum let Brian's explore a little before slowly gliding his over Brian's. He could taste the tea and honey on Brian's breath as Brian drew his into his system, pressing his chest against Callum's. Callum reached up and put his hand on Brian's back to pull him a little closer.

*This isn't bad. I could definitely get used to this.*

Slowly, quietly, the sensations in his mouth traveled down his spine, relocating in his pelvis and moving forward. As he grew harder, he wondered if he was kissing Brian correctly and hoped Brian was getting as excited as he was. As if on cue, Brian pushed his hips against Callum's, who was momentarily surprised at the hardness pressing against his. Callum sighed as he relaxed into the couch more, finding a spark from Brian he'd never noticed in Theresa. He ran his hands over Brian's back, comforted by the warmth from under his shirt.

*I never thought holding a bloke could feel so nice, even if it is me best mate from work. He put his hands on either side of Brian's face and stroke his mustache with his thumb. Maybe if Timothy McHenry was as decent a kisser as Bri, I would have proposed to him instead of Theresa.*

His mouth still against Callum's, Brian moved to one side and slid his hand down Callum's chest. He reached the front of Callum's pants and squeezed the length of his erection. With a gasp, Callum jumped up from the couch and pushed Brian out of his way. "Sorry, Bri." Callum wrapped his arms around himself. "I din't mean to ruin it fer ye. I know ye said to trust me instinct, which is why I kissed ye in the first place. I mean, the kissing's great. Ye're a great kisser. But the rest of it? I'm not sure fer now."

"No, it's okay."

"Ye sound upset."

"I am. Partly at you, mostly at myself."

"I don't want tonight to end on a bad note, Bri."

"Don't worry, Callum. I should have known."



"I'm all right. I will be. And I still want yer phone number."

Brian kissed the tip of Callum's nose. "Sorry if I over stepped any boundaries."

"It's okay. I should have expected that. I mean, what else does a bloke do with his hands when kissing another bloke?"

"I could tell you in lurid detail, but it's getting late and we need to get up early tomorrow."

"That's okay. I need to meet with Theresa in the morning so she can get the rest of her things, so I have to shove off soon."

Brian picked up a business card case off the coffee table. "Remember, call me if you need me." He opened the case and handed a card to Callum.

"Except during *EastEnders*." Callum put the card in his wallet. "I'll see ye Saturday morning, then."

He kissed Brian again, their lips lingering. Callum stepped closer tilted his head a little bit and their mustaches brushed together again; this time, Brian's touched Callum's nose, which caused him to jump back a little with a laugh.

"I give up. I quit. What did I do now?" Brian asked as he looked at the ceiling and threw his hands in the air.

Callum rubbed his nose. "Yer mustache tickled me."

"Oh, bother." He put his arms around Callum's neck. "You *are* just a bundle of nerves tonight, aren't you?"

"This has been an interesting evening, I can assure ye. I do hope to have a repeat. Except without as much yelping in surprise and running away." Callum lightly kissed Brian on the lips once more. "See ye Saturday?"

"Of course." Brian released Callum and walked him to the door. He held it open as Callum put on his jacket. "Nine o'clock."

"Except during *EastEnders*." Callum couldn't get over how much the blue in Brian's eyes sparkled whenever he laughed. He kissed Brian once again then left with a wave.

Later that evening, Brian lay in bed. He traced his fingertips over his lips, and could still feel Callum's against them.

*Poor boy. I hope whatever he gets out of this is beneficial.*

Brian turned over and opened his eyes. "Bloody hell," he said out loud. "I hope whatever he gets out of this isn't enough to send him back into the closet. That's all I'd need: the revelation that a failed relationship with me is so bad, I make gay men go *straight*."

## Chapter Six

The sound of the alarm clock irritated him awake, so Callum reached over and shut it off, then turned onto his side. Without opening his eyes, he could tell he was completely alone in his bed. He took up too much room, spread out across what was once Theresa's side of the bed. It had been over a month since his divorce and he still hadn't gotten used to waking up alone.

Other habits and preferences had started to emerge. He was able to leave the bedroom window open at night. He left water from the morning cuppa in the kettle so he could have another in the evening. He could leave the dishes in the rack for an extra day or two without upsetting the universal balance. Little things that Callum felt would make the space his own.

He went into the bathroom for a quick shower, then dressed and headed downstairs for some tea. Even though the place was small, Callum imagined every creak, pop, snap and rustle was amplified. He'd lived alone before but he needed to make the readjustment of being alone again. The front room felt absolutely cavernous, the kitchen like it was the size of an airplane hangar.

In the kitchen, Callum checked the kettle. Just enough water for two, possibly three cups, so he put the lid back on and plugged the kettle in. As he took his mug from the drain rack next to the sink, he noted the dishes really needed to be put away when he

got home later that night. While the rack wasn't overflowing, Callum figured Theresa had a point and wanted the place to look nice.

But leaving water in the kettle meant it was ready whenever he wanted some tea, damnit.

While he wasn't usually one for the line of thought, Callum was grateful it was Friday. Brian had been rather vague about their plans, always smiling and answering "you'll see" whenever Callum asked what they were.

"Driving me bonkers," Callum muttered to himself as the kettle clicked off. He just knew it was part of some grand conspiracy.

Unlike living alone, dating was becoming easier. Callum was more comfortable with Brian on their days out and followed his instinct as Brian had suggested. As always, Brian remained the gentleman and never asked for more than a kiss. Callum had taken a certain joy in just being with Brian as they held hands or walked arm in arm.

Maybe, just maybe, everything was going to turn out okay.

Outside the station by his office, Callum found Brian waiting for him. His shoulders sagged and he slouched over, looking droopy. "Morning, Bri. Ye feeling all right?"

"Kettle's not working and I'm out of milk. Hope you're having a better morning than I."

"Aye, I guess," Callum said as they walked into the foyer. "I'm settling in by meself all right, but the house feels so much larger now that I'm alone."

"Shush! Lady Gossipmonger dead ahead at the lifts. No hope for evasive maneuvers."

Natalie had spotted them and gave a noncommittal wave. "Hello, Brian, Callum," she said with almost no trace of emotion.

"Morning, Natalie," Brian replied.

"Hallo," Callum added. The trio stood in awkward silence as they waited for the lift.

"Is everything all right with you, Callum?" Natalie asked.

"Oh. Aye. Just fine."

"I was a little surprised when you took those days off last month."

"Everything's taken care of, thanks."

"I wanted to show you my concern earlier, but Brian forbade me from sending a card."

"It didn't warrant one, but thanks, all the same." Callum began to wonder if somebody had hit the emergency stop on all four cars.

"That's silly, Callum. There's a card for every occasion."

"Not this one." Finally. The car closest to Callum and Brian had arrived, the doors sliding open. They got in, Natalie close behind.

"Honestly, what happened that I couldn't have gotten you a card?"

Callum put his hand up to block the door from closing then leaned closer to Natalie. "None of yer blinking business. Going up?" he asked and moved his hand without waiting for her answer.

"I'll catch the next..." The door closed and cut her off.

In the lift, Callum leaned back against the wall. "I'm a unit head. I shouldn't have to put up with this."

"The scintillating conversation of your fascinating coworkers holds you in some sort of thrall, I guess. So," Brian said as they stepped out and walked to their desks, "to start our weekend together, can I interest you in a stop at M&S?"

"Honestly, Bri. No more underpants."

"No. Honestly." Brian paused for a moment. "Well, maybe not honestly. It hasn't been completely ruled out. But I do need a new kettle. Mine crapped out between last night and this morning."

"Can't ye get it fixed?"

"It might be cheaper to just buy a new one. I swear: home electrics aren't anywhere near the men's department."

"Bri, do ye realize we sound like an old married couple?"

"Good Lord, you're right. I can remember my grandmum having a conversation like this with my granddad when they were alive." They stopped at Brian's desk and he hung his jacket on its hook.

Callum crossed his arms. "So, man panties are worth risking a conversation on attendance with Fairmerchant, yet an electric kettle isn't?"

"At least I can sneak into the gents' and put on a new pair of underpants when nobody's looking. What good's a kettle going to do sitting under my desk all day?"

"Ye could plug it in at yer desk instead of going down to the caff."

"Can't. Remember? The Great Kettle Fire of '05?"

"Oh, yeah. So do ye have any other plans for this weekend besides a trip to M&S?"

"We'll see," Brian said in a elusive tone.

"Ye've had yer fun, Bri. Please. Tell me. Okay?"

"Why? Can't it be a surprise?"

"Why? Can't ye tell me?"

"Then it won't be a surprise, and it won't be fun. Can't I just do this? Please? I haven't been able to do something like this for anybody else in ages. Just leave everything to me, okay? You'll love it."

"Okay, okay, I trust ye."

A frazzled Natalie passed them in the hall, and she stopped once she saw Brian and Callum. Without a word, she glared at them then walked to her desk.

As the day went on, Callum concentrated less on his work and more on the brilliance of Brian's eyes and smile, and the dark hair barely visible at the collar of his polo shirts. Callum also wondered if the rest of Brian's skin was as soft and warm as his lips, how much hair he had on the rest of his body and what it felt like.

As attracted to Brian as Callum was, the prospect of further physical contact both frightened and excited him.

*This is another man, fer God's sake.*

Callum stared out the window opposite.

*Now that I have the opportunity to finally experience what I've only dreamt about for the last thousand years or so, what the hell do I do next?*

He couldn't wait for Brian, who had to wait for Callum, but how to let Brian know it might be time to move things further along?

Callum turned back to his work (the coworker across the way was starting to give him odd looks).

*Simple. It's simple, really. I need to let Bri know. I need to be the one who makes the next move. I need the sky to fall on me head before I do anything stupid.* He rubbed his forehead. *Great. I'm back at Our Lady of the Blessed Bleeding Internal Organs and the girls from Gloria Excelsis Deo's Scholastic Institution for Proper Little Ladies have come across the football pitch that separated the schools. They've come for the monthly dance and I'm expected, no, commanded by the headmaster to ask at least one of the girls for at least one dance, else I face latrine duty the following fortnight.*

Callum leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling.

*Except I think I might be looking forward to getting naked with Bri more than I did dancing with Mary Ann Louise McPherson.*

Funny thing; at these dances, he always wound up with Mary Ann Louise, who always smelled like an odd combination of toothpaste and goat cheese. Maybe that's why Callum never let Theresa buy goat cheese whenever they had guests or why he never touched the stuff at company parties. He figured he had eighteen hours to work up the courage, long enough for an outbound Gatwick Express to crash through the wall behind him and solve all his problems.

Callum's defeatist attitude had lessened by the end of the day but he still felt a little tense when he stopped by Brian's desk. As he watched Brian stand and collect his things, Callum tried to imagine what he looked like wearing the same blue jeans he'd worn that first time Callum had gone over to his flat, except without his shirt. The only image he could conjure was that of Sean Connery on the beach in *Dr. No*.

*So that's where that came from. Here I thought I only watched the Bond films because I like to watch the cars and explosions.* He smiled to himself.

"Something amuses you?" Brian asked as he put on his jacket and broke Callum's concentration.

"Hm? Aye, actually. Just sorting through some things in me head."

"Good. You should do that more often, especially if it makes you smile."

Callum caught Brian's glance and resisted the sudden urge to hug him and kiss his cheek. In fact, Callum felt his hand come up for a second but quickly stopped. "Sorry. Almost fergot where I was."

"I wouldn't have minded."

"Can ye imagine the gossip and tongue wagging if we had?" Callum asked as they left the building.

"I say we should, but I'm not that kind of guy. I'm incredibly fond of you, but as unit heads we do need to observe a bit of decorum at work."

"Agreed." Callum leaned closer to Brian and whispered, "Maybe this weekend we can abandon all pretense of decorum?"

"So...do you mean it?"

"Aye, I think so."

"So, you'd like you and I to...and me and you doing...the both of us..."

"Maybe. I'm not sure yet. I do know I'd at least like to see ye without a shirt."

"Oh, my," Brian said as they continued toward M&S.

"We don't have to...everything, as much as I'd like to...everything." Callum tried to take stock of his surroundings. No chunks of sky, no errant passenger trains, not even any thundering herds of wildebeest headed in his direction. Damn.

They stopped just outside M&S and faced each other. "That sounds great," Brian said in a quiet, reassuring tone as his brilliant blue eyes lit up. "As long as you're certain."

"Aye. One of the benefits of me job is it affords me plenty of time to think. But if ye'd rather not, I'd understand."

"What? Callum, of course I want to...with you and I...and me and you..."

"So why do ye sound as nervous as I feel?"



"I just don't want to do anything that'll muck it up for you."

"That goes double fer me." Callum reached over and took Brian's hand as they entered the store. "Were ye this scared the first time ye asked another bloke if he would...the two of ye...together?"

"The first time I asked another guy wasn't quite as pleasant. He broke my nose."

"Sorry to bring it up, Bri."

"That's okay. It was a long time ago and I've obviously gotten over it."

"Uh, Bri, are ye sure we're only here to get ye a new kettle?"

Brian checked the directional sign they were under. Home electrics were behind them and on blind instinct, he had led Callum to the men's department. "Sorry there, old man. Force of habit."

"I'll just bet," Callum replied as they changed direction, off once again to the correct department.

The next morning, Callum had woken up two hours earlier than he'd planned. His proposition to Brian had dominated his thoughts the night before and he was unable to completely fall asleep, drifting off in fits and starts. While he was a little relieved that he'd actually said something, Callum wondered what he would do about it. He reached over to his nightstand and took out a dog-eared copy of *The Joy of Gay Sex*. He sat up and flipped through it once again to look at everything he'd marked "aye," "no," and "maybe," and felt foolish that he had to rely on an instruction manual.

Callum put the book back on the nightstand and rubbed his hands over his face. "Laird," he said out loud to himself, "I'm not studying for me exams. I'm not even sure if I'm ready for...Bri and I...and the two of us...and me and Bri..." He laughed a little, then got out of bed and dressed.

He had settled in to flip through television channels but didn't get very far when the doorbell rang. Callum checked the clock on top of the television; if Brian was at the door, he was early.

Callum turned off the television and went to the door. He took a deep breath, smoothed down his hair, and opened the door to Brian.

"Sorry," Brian said. "The train would have dropped me off too early or too late, so I hope you don't mind I settled for early."

"No, that's fine. Come on in." Callum stepped aside for Brian to enter.

Brian wore a blue polo shirt that brought out the crystal in his eyes and revealed a small tuft of black chest hair at the collar. He also had on a pair of tan walking shorts, his legs covered in the same thick hair as his arms, and his trainers (no socks). Brian looked polished, as usual, even though he was in casual dress, and smiled as he entered the house.

"Good morning," Brian said and kissed Callum's cheek. "Ready for today's mystery adventure?" In one hand, he carried his denim jacket and in the other, a wicker picnic hamper.

"Aye, but if ye keep dressing so nice, I'm going to develop a complex." Callum indicated his blue jeans and grey pocket t-shirt as he closed the door.

"You look absolutely fine, Callum. It's not like we're going to a garden party at Buckingham Palace." Brian put his jacket on a chair, then fluffed Callum's hair with his fingers. "You've had it cut. They did a nice job."

"Aye, and I had the beard trimmed. I'm just trying to pull meself together."

Brian smoothed Callum's hair back into place. "It does. It looks rather nice on you. Well. Shall we away?"

"Certainly." Brian tossed his jacket over his shoulder so he could hold Callum's hand during the walk to the train station.

Brian led Callum to Greenwich for a day at the Old Royal Observatory Park, a vast expanse of heavenly green hills that rolled and bobbed. Brian handed Callum his jacket and kicked off his shoes. He picked them up and they continued, Brian on the grass instead of the path.

"This is why nature was invented," he said as he held out his arms, closed his eyes, and tilted his head back. "If not to provide food and shelter for our ancestors, but for the simple pleasure of walking barefoot through the grass on an early summer's Saturday morning."

"I'm surprised Mum didn't send me and my brother outside to play wearing cast iron boots. All the broken glass, rusty nails, scrap metal, stinging insects, and burning embers that supposedly littered our neighborhood, you'd think we lived in a war zone."

They found an area that hadn't been completely taken over by other people with the same idea, the only sound being a light breeze that moved through the trees and the distant chatter of tourists as they trudged up the main hill to visit the observatory. Brian set the hamper down on the ground, opened it and took out a large checked tablecloth. He spread it out, putting his shoes on each of two corners, then knelt on it. "Come on. Have a nice, brisk sit."

Callum sat next to Brian. As Brian rummaged in the hamper, Callum removed his shoes and socks, and set them on another corner of the cloth. "This is turning out to be a rather low key adventure."

"It's meant to. Here. You can play Mother and pour the tea."

"So we're aren't at a garden party at Buckingham Palace, but the menu is starting to look it."

"Almost. The nibbles aren't as fancy. I just figured that with everything going on in our lives right now, we need to stop, have a nice cuppa, and simply be."

"My. How Zen of you."

"Our days are so structured, scheduled, and rigid. Add to that your recent developments, I felt you deserved a nice, quiet day off."

"Honestly, Bri, you're beginning to spoil me." Callum paused and inspected the sandwich he'd chosen before he put it on his plate and took another. "There isn't any...goat cheese on any of these, is there?"

"No, some are smoked salmon and others are buttered cucumber with a little bit of dill."

"There's smoked salmon? Why didn't you say so?" Callum put a salmon sandwich on his plate with the others. "You shouldn't have gone through so much trouble."

"Really, Callum. It wasn't any trouble at all." Brian paused. "Well, the biscuits were the hardest part. It was so much trouble buying them, taking them home, opening the

packet, and putting them into the container. I don't know how I was able to get them done in time." He fanned himself with a napkin.

"Poor lad. Ye shouldn't strain yerself. What were ye saying just now about rushing around?"

"I don't know. I knew I was speaking, but all I heard was 'blah, blah, blah'. I'm never one to follow my own advice. No matter how sound it is."

After the Thermos was empty and the last of the sandwiches had been consumed, Brian lay down on the tablecloth with his head on Callum's stomach. "This was such a wonderful idea," Callum quietly said, his eyes closed and his hands behind his head. "I'm almost forgetting about the mountain of laundry I need to do yet."

"Shush," Brian replied. "This is a no 'I'm so busy and I have so much waiting at home for me to do' area. I have declared it thus. Nobody entering the park may complain about the world outside its boundaries."

"Aye, m'lud. Anything ye say, m'lud."

"But this has been an excellent morning," Brian briefly checked his watch. "Afternoon. It's now an excellent afternoon."

"Has that much time passed already? It doesn't even feel like it. It seems like we're still back at half past ten and we've only just spread out the cloth."

"Well, we've eaten all the sandwiches, drunk all the tea, and there's maybe four or five biscuits left."

Callum studied the cloud formations. "When I was a child, me brother scared me and told me clouds were actually made of candy floss. For the longest time, I was afraid to go outside when it rained because I din't want to get sticky."

"I didn't want to eat candy floss because it reminded me of the insulation Dad had installed in the attic."

"I'll bet ye were loads of fun on trips to the seaside amusement parks." Callum reached up and traced the outline of a passing cloud with his fingertip.

"The last time we went, I remember I was over that phase."

Callum closed his eyes once again. "So, are there any more plans for today?"

"Plans? Plans? What are these 'plans' of which you speak?"

"I thought so."

"I was actually thinking about the possibility of having a pint before heading back home." Brian stretched his arms over his head.

"Sold." While both were still relaxed, Callum decided to jump at the chance. "Then maybe ye could come back to me place for a quick nightcap and a cuddle?"

"Sure."

"But that would mean I'd have to get up again. I'm simply enjoying meself too much."

"Oh, come on." Brian poked Callum's stomach. "The sooner we get the hamper packed, the sooner we'll be back at the Feather and Larch, awash in cider. I'm buying first round."

"Ye drive a hard bargain, mister." Callum put on his shoes and socks, and watched Brian as he packed the hamper. "Bri? Come here." When Brian looked up from the hamper, Callum leaned forward and kissed him. "Thanks again. It was really sweet of ye to do this fer me."

"Surely. As long as the weather holds out, would you like to do this again? If you're willing, I've got the hamper."

"Sounds terrific. But next time, I'm providing the nibbly things."

"Sold."

## Chapter Seven

The littlest things made Brian and Callum giggle like maniacs on the train ride back to Callum's house. Somebody's hair was the wrong shade of pink. Another's boots were too tall. The simple fact they were both drunk out of their gourds was enough to send Brian into another fit of laughter with a snort, which caused Callum to join him. Their giggling continued all the way from the station to Callum's house and as Callum fumbled with his keys to open the door, Brian kissed the back of Callum's neck.

"Careful, Bri!" he said as he finally unlocked the door, caught in another fit. "Ye almost made me drop me keys."

"Sorry!" Brian replied in a stage whisper. Callum opened the door and they went inside.

"It's just us," Callum switched on the overhead light.

"Sorry. Force of habit, living in a block of flats and all."

"Shall I put the kettle on?" Callum closed and locked the door.

Brian yawned suddenly. "Sorry, Callum. That wasn't meant as editorial comment. I'm just feeling rather sleepy."

"Should just...head up, then?"

"Yeah, that would be fine. I must have had more at G.A.Y. than I thought."

"More than me, but ye know it doesn't take much to put me under the table." Callum took Brian's hand, then led him upstairs.

In the bedroom, Callum switched on the light and paused: he'd left out his copy of *The Joy of Gay Sex*. "Oh. That," he said and quickly grabbed the book off the nightstand.

"Ah, the sacred texts. I actually had to improvise when I was first starting out." Brian sat on the edge of the bed, then unlaced his boots. "You kids today have it better than I."

Callum put the book back on the nightstand. "Bri, I'm only two years younger."

"Really? That's all?"

"Aye."

"Funny. I thought you were much younger than that."

"No, Bri. Two years."

"That's right."

Brian's fingers had slid into the waistband of his underwear (one of the dozens of black briefs Callum was certain he'd had hidden back at his flat) when Callum jumped forward and grabbed Brian's wrist. "No!"

"Huh? What?" Brian looked down at Callum's hand.

"Sorry, Bri." Callum took a deep breath. "Din't mean to scare ye like that." Embarrassed, he busied himself, carefully raising the window blinds and opening the window a little.

"Oh, God, sorry, Callum. Are you still nervous?"

Callum nodded. "Aye, a little. If ye don't mind, I'd rather we just...sleep together. Just so I can get used to the idea of another bloke in me bed." Callum was ready to admit, he wouldn't be held responsible for his actions, as sexy as Brian looked in nothing but his white socks and black underpants, his grey ponytail over one shoulder.

"Of course," Brian said. "Force of habit. I'm usually the first one completely undressed whenever I spend the night with another gent."

"So I can see," Callum replied with a quizzical arch of his eyebrow.

"So. Yeah. Anyway, which side of the bed is 'yours?'"

"The left, closest to the window."

"That's fine." Brian got into bed, arranged the blankets over himself, then leaned back and closed his eyes. Callum took off his jeans and switched off the light, then lay down on his side next to Brian. "You can come a little bit closer,"

"Sorry," Callum slid his arm under Brian's neck, his free hand over Brian's chest. He moved it back and forth a bit to determine if there was a correct way to lay his arm on Brian.

"Don't apologize, Callum. You don't have to with me." He hugged Callum closer and kissed the top of his head. "I want you to get comfortable and just relax."

"All right." Callum put his arm across Brian's chest. "Like that?"

Brian rubbed Callum's upper arm. "Yeah. You've got some nice definition. In fact, you feel good all over. "Nice patch of fur." He ran his fingers through Callum's chest hair.

"Thanks. Ye feel...I don't think I've ever encountered this much hair on another bloke before."

"Trust me. You'll meet hairier."

"I can't believe how soft yer skin is. And warm."

"That's me: warm, soft, and hairy." The two shared another laugh. "Feeling better?"

"Aye, a little. Me stomach's doing some interesting tricks, though."

"Did you need to get to the lav?"

"No, it'll settle." Callum chuckled. "I'm just a little bit nervous."

"Don't be."

"Bri, this is the first real time I've let another man touch me like this. I'm trying to enjoy meself but I can't shake the nagging suspicion that me mum is going to burst in at any second."

"Callum, every man I've known, gay or straight, has that same fear. Why do you think men not staying to cuddle afterwards is one of the complaints in women's magazines? The bloke's trying to get out before Mum shows up!"

"And she has, hasn't she?"



"As open and liberal as my parents are, the times they'd caught me in the throes of self-abuse unnerved them. It probably had more to do with the invasion of my privacy."

"What, ye'd do it out in the front room?"

"In the lav, please." Brian paused. "Of course, there was the one time if they'd been ten minutes earlier, they would have found Monty Swanson on his stomach on the sitting room floor and my face stuffed between his ass cheeks."

"My, ye were the adventurous sort growing up, weren't ye?"

"Oh, I still can be. Remember last year we had a crew in at work, renovating the gents' and ladies' rooms?"

"Aye."

"And all that 'overtime' I put in?"

"Bri, I heard those quotes."

"There was one in particular. He was rather short but he had the most incredibly wide shoulders. His waist was so slim, his torso resembled an inverted triangle."

"The one ye said looked like Simon LeBon."

"Exactly. He struck within me a Duran Duran fantasy I hadn't known until that month."

"Sounds like he was a rather special bloke at the time," Callum said, trailing his finger up Brian's chest.

"Actually, aside from the way he had me bent over the vanity in the ladies' room and the stench of fresh grout almost ruining the moment by making me sick, I remember he was more Welsh than anything else."

"Always a man fer the accents, I see."

"His wasn't as charming as yours. Nor were his eyes."

"Bri..."

Brian kissed Callum's forehead. "Honest truth. *You're* a special bloke, Callum. I hope you remember that."

"It's sinking in," Callum replied, relaxed by the warmth and softness of Brian's lips.

"Well, I'll keep telling you, then."

That night, Callum dreamt about the Japanese dragon again. The dragon smiled and winked at Callum before it flew off into the perfect blue sky, spiraling through the air before he disappeared.

The next morning, Callum woke up on his back, Brian's arm draped across his chest. He propped himself up on his elbow and watched Brian sleep for a bit. Brian was just as handsome asleep as he was awake, his cheeks covered in silver stubble. Callum smiled, leaned forward and kissed Brian on the forehead. Brian inhaled deeply and turned over onto his back.

"I swear, Mr. Walcott, I didn't start it," he muttered. His eyes shot open and darted about as he gathered his wits. "Oh, thank God. This isn't St. Apollonaria's. And you're definitely not Mr. Walcott. Thank God."

"Morning, Bri." Callum put his hand on Brian's shoulder and they kissed, the barest whisper of tongues playing over their lips. "Did ye sleep well?"

Brian ran his fingertip down Callum's nose and his eyes shined in the dim morning light. "I feel like I could use another two or three days' worth. But I'll be okay."

"Care for a fry-up this morning, or would some simple tea and toast suffice?"

"Tea and toast, please."

"Right." Neither attempted to get out of bed.

"How are you this morning?"

Callum put his arms around Brian and stroked his shoulder. "I'm fine. Me mum din't charge, so I guess I'll survive." He paused when something pressed against his thigh. "Good Laird, man. That isn't..."

"What?"

"On me leg."

"Just a morning stiffy. I get them all the time."

Callum pressed his leg closer to Brian. "What the hell are ye packing in there?"

"It's not much bigger than anybody else's, Callum."

"Well, I've only got mine as a basis for comparison, so I'm not sure know what's too big or too small."

"Look. I can show you."

"Well, that's..." Callum stopped. "Maybe...later."

*Maybe when we're in yer bed and not here.*

"Sure. In your time."

"Of course, it gives me more time to worry about what we do about work."

"Probably what we've always done: show up, do our work, mind our own business, go on break one too many times, have Natalie scowl at us for having too much fun. Why?"

"Won't ye feel a bit...odd working with somebody once ye've seen them nekkid?"

"No, probably not. I've only been fantasizing about what you look like nude for the longest time and what I've seen so far almost confirms my deepest wishes."

"Come on, Bri. I'm serious here."

"Honestly? I won't have any trouble working with you after this. We're in separate areas on the same floor and our main contact is seeing each other for breaks and lunch."

Callum hugged Brian again. "But it's going to be very hard concentrating on anything else when I've got the memory of yer cock pressed against me leg. As if I wasn't already fixated on yer eyes and smile."

"My eyes? Really? Why, thank you."

"Certainly." Callum kissed Brian on the forehead. "Ye've got the most startling blue eyes I've ever seen on a person. And I know I've never seen such long hair on a bloke before."

"I get it from my father. His is just as long, but not as grey."

"I think it's beautiful." Callum stroked Brian's hair. "Did ye want to get some more sleep?"

"I'd love to, if you don't mind."

"It's still pretty early. A couple more hours and then up for brekkies?"

"Sounds good."

Callum closed his eyes and as he tried to go to sleep again, he could have sworn he felt Brian's eyes on him. "Ye're watching me," he said and opened one eye.

Brian still leaned on his elbow. "Yes. I'm watching you. Can't I?"

"I guess."

"Does it bother you?"

"No. It's just..." Callum shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"Does it?"

Callum shook his head. "No, Bri. I'm just not used to anybody taking a fancy to me."

"Why not? I'm sure there are others out there who'd find you attractive."

"But, why me, Bri?" Callum sat up and hugged his knees. "I mean, look at us. We're so completely different. I look a mess most days and ye're always so well put-together. Ye're an incredibly handsome bloke, and I'm..."

Brian held up his hand. "Stop right there, please. I will not let you continue comparing yourself to me. It's not fair to either of us, especially since I get the feeling you're holding me to some lofty ideals."

"I'm not. I mean, I just think ye're so much better looking than I. Ye can have yer choice of any of the blokes at work or down at the Feather and Larch."

"I've told you a thousand times in my emails: I think you're smart, you're funny, you've got nice eyes and an incredible smile. We've got similar interests and above all else, I think you're a great bloke. One of my best mates."

"Well, ye did say ye were kidding about a lot of it."

"But here we are, together, in your bed. I'd say that made me rather serious about much of what I put in those emails."

"I wasn't sure. I'm not familiar with the mating rituals."

"I've been out nigh on thirty years now, Callum, and even I haven't gotten those figured out."

"That's reassuring. Ye're supposed to be me mentor, remember?"

"Okay. You're right. Not admitting I have all the answers is setting a bad example."

"I was being sarcastic, and ye know it," Callum replied. Brian simply wagged his eyebrows. "So, ye want to continue seeing each other, I take it?"

"Of course, Callum. I like you, damnit. I've enjoyed myself these last few weeks. How many times and how many different ways do I have to say it?"

"Sorry. I just need some reassurance right now."

"Everything's fine, Callum. I want you to believe me when I say that."

"Maybe I'm just afraid I'll lose ye, too."

Brian took Callum's hand. "You won't. Not right away, anyway. We've come this far. I said I'd help you and be there for you, and I meant it. I don't want you concentrating on if and when we stop seeing each other. I know the pain of your divorce is still rather new, but you can't think about the consequences until they happen. Call me. Keep calling me. If I'm not available and the situation is dire enough, remember the help line numbers I gave you."

"Thanks again," Callum whispered.

"Even if we stop this arrangement, I'll always be one of your mates."

"Even if I were to meet somebody else next week?"

"Especially if you were...wait. You aren't...planning anything. Are you?" Brian asked, a little surprised.

"Not really. But we aren't going to be an exclusive couple, are we?"

"Is that something you'd want?"

"I can tell ye I'm not about to scamper off just to see how many blokes I can pull, but I'm not ready to completely settle down again, either. Not just yet."

"We'll just have to wait and see. Until then, I'm willing to continue with the way things are."

"That's fine. I just don't want the pressure that comes with a serious relationship right now."

"But you promise you won't be meeting anybody new next week?" Brian asked.

"Honestly and truly, Bri? It's only taken how long fer me to get to this point? I suspect it'll take twice as long before I'm able to even think about talking to another bloke."

"Okay. Sorry." Brian squeezed Callum's hand. "But can you promise me something else?"

"What's that?"

"Can you please come down to M&S with me tomorrow after work so we can get you some proper underpants? Those boxers are totally unbecoming."

"What?" Callum looked down at his lap. "I like them. They're comfortable."

"But they aren't flattering. You've got a great shape to you and they just hang there."

"Okay, okay," Callum said with a groan. "Just one pair. I like them, I keep them and get more. I don't like them, ye've got a new dust rag."

"Deal."

Quietly, Callum asked, "Are ye sure this isn't some bizarre plot to use me as an excuse to feed yer habit?"

"Got me there."

"I knew it. Well, since we're going to be intimately involved for a while, I now know what to get ye for Christmas."

"I can even show you the database I have at home so you won't repeat styles or colors." Brian looked up. Callum stared at him, his mouth and eyes wide in surprise.

"Relax, will you? There's a forty percent chance I'm just kidding."

## Chapter Eight

Brian shifted around in his chair as he tapped his pen on his desk. Stumped, he stared at the appraisal he was correcting to force the answers to magically appear. Apparently, the math fairies were engaged elsewhere. His telephone rang and interrupted his brooding. "Brian Parker-Eddy, how may I help you?"

He hoped he conveyed enough interest in the person at the other end.

"Mr. Parker-Eddy, this is Mr. Fairmerchant. Are you available at the moment?"

"I'm free."

"Would you please come into my office, then? I have a matter of great importance to discuss."

"Certainly, Mr. Fairmerchant. I'll be there momentarily." They hung up and Brian rolled his eyes.

*That's an awful lot of words to say he wants to see me.*

He stood and put on his jacket then checked his watch. It was close to break time with Callum, so he quickly stopped at his desk. "Bad news, Callum. I can't go on break with you right now."

"Is everything all right?" Callum asked.

"I hope so. I've been called into Fairmerchant's office for an unscheduled chat," Brian said as he buttoned his jacket.

"Well, it's been nice knowing ye," Callum said with a salute. "Maybe we can go after ye get back."

"Hopefully, it won't take too long. I'll see you after I get out."

The door was ajar when he arrived at Fairmerchant's office, but Brian still knocked. "Come in."

Brian entered and found Fairmerchant wasn't alone. Also present were Mr. Kline from human resources and Mrs. Yarrow, Brian's supervisor from one of the nebulous "upstairs departments" whose duties seemed to be shrouded in the mists of time and performed in secret. "Good afternoon, Mr. Parker-Eddy. Please close the door behind you."

*This is it. I am doomed.*

Brian closed the door as demanded then took the empty chair in front of Fairmerchant's desk. "Good afternoon, all."

*Natalie's finally set the hounds on me.*

"Mr. Parker-Eddy, I've asked Mr. Kline and Mrs. Yarrow to join us to discuss a great opportunity for you. Mrs. Yarrow has let me know your performance has been exemplary and I'd like to commend you for that."

"Thank you, Mr. Fairmerchant." Brian was certain everybody could see him blush.

*Thank God. This doesn't have anything to do with me having the gay.*

"You've consistently exceeded the firm's expectations for somebody in your position," Mrs. Yarrow said. "Any errors have had minimal impact on the operation and you've always been willing to assist with correcting them, staying after, if necessary."

"It's rather hard to avoid them," Brian answered with a small shrug. "After all, my name and initials are on the work, so I can't deny anything."

"I've hardly ever had to remind you of the deadlines we have for monthly reporting," Mrs. Yarrow continued. "We've never had to look for you because something was late or missing, which shows a conscientious effort to maintain policy."

"When I make a commitment, I see it through to the end." Brian hoped the way he raised his eyebrows looked more like he had employed proper body language and facial expressions as opposed to trying to keep his eyes open and not fall asleep from the business speak flying about the room.



"Which brings us to the purpose of this meeting," Mr. Fairmerchant said. "Mrs. Yarrow will be retiring in two months' time and upon her recommendation, I would like to put your name in the running for her position. It would be a full supervisory promotion with improved salary and benefits."

"A promotion? Really?" Brian asked, suddenly awake. He was certain his raised eyebrows made him look more like a psychotic nun-kicker than a diligent employee who'd been told he was up for a promotion.

"It hasn't been approved yet," Mr. Kline said. "We're simply notifying the eligible candidates with a formal appointment to come shortly after Mrs. Yarrow announces her retirement."

"No, I understand, Mr. Kline. Let me just say thank you all for the opportunity and I hope I've proven myself."

"I'd say you have, Mr. Parker-Eddy," Mr. Fairmerchant continued, "though I still don't know how somebody who spends so much time on break gets so much done around here."

Brian winked and tapped the side of his nose with his forefinger. "I know some elves who lost their jobs when the shoe market moved to Asia."

"Well, if you'd be so kind as to give me their names, I'll put them in consideration for the promotion, as well." Mr. Kline picked up his pen as he, Mrs. Yarrow, and Brian laughed.

"Yes, I'm sure they'd appreciate it," Mr. Fairmerchant replied in a tone that suggested he was wanted to be funny but didn't hide his displeasure with the humor. "Now, we ask you keep this matter confidential, Mr. Parker-Eddy. Disclosure before the formal announcement of Mrs. Yarrow's retirement will be looked upon as a serious performance issue and taken into consideration."

"I understand, Mr. Fairmerchant." His stomach knotted immediately.

*Keep quiet on this? For two months?*

"Well, if you have no further questions, I thank you for your time."

"Thank you again, Mr. Fairmerchant, Mrs. Yarrow, Mr. Kline," Brian said as he stood and left the office. Once in the hall, he leaned against the wall and took a deep breath.

Two months? Wonderful. His first secret to hide from his boyfriend.

As he walked back to Callum's desk, Brian began to edit how he was going to tell Callum. Simple. Mrs. Yarrow wanted to tell him in person what she thought of his performance and felt it important enough to tell him in front of Mr. Fairmerchant. One third of the truth and enough to pacify Callum's curiosity. Mr. Kline simply wouldn't show up in the new version. But the closer he got to Callum's desk, the more excited Brian became. He needed to tell somebody about this it. Who else but Callum? Aside from the little digs about his tea breaks, spilling early would warrant enough serious trouble.

"Good news?" Callum asked as Brian approached.

"Yes. Mrs. Yarrow wanted to compliment my work to Fairmerchant." Brian hoped he'd sounded convincing.

"So it's now on yer permanent record?"

"It's official. I'm loved by virtually every life form that works here."

"I'm buying, then," Callum said as they walked to the lifts.

"Yeah, about that, as well," Brian continued. Let the golden boy sucking up begin.

"Oh, dear."

"Yeah, Fairmerchant mentioned it again. I need to start being more careful about my attendance. I'll still be able to join the gang on the playground, but we're going to have to watch how often we go and for how long."

"That serious?"

"The intimation was there that it could seriously affect any future opportunities here," Brian whispered as he pushed the lift call button.

"Sorry to hear that. Well, instead of several shorter breaks, we can take one really long one," Callum suggested.

"I tried that exactly once," Brian said as the lift arrived and they got in the car.

\* \* \* \*

It was simple: Brian needed to tell somebody about his possible promotion, and his parents were far enough removed from his company so he didn't think he would have (seriously) violated the confidentiality request.

"So, what do you think?" he asked after he explained his opportunity.

"That's great, dear," his mother said, her voice laden with disappointment.

"It's fantastic," his father said on the extension, also less than enthusiastic.

"But...?" Brian asked.

"Well, dear, you know our stand on large corporations," his mother said.

"Which is why I work for a London-based company with a progressive history of community support. Good Lord, Mum, they were one of the first to offer on-site child care, one of your pet issues."

His father sighed. "As long as you're happy, Brian."

"I am," Brian said as he lay down on the couch. "Things are going rather well for me. I was hoping you'd show a little more excitement, though. I have to keep this under wraps until they make the announcement in four months. I mean, I've had to lie to my boyfriend about it."

His father perked up a little. "'Boyfriend'?"

"I figured that would get your attention."

"How lovely," his mother said, also more interested in her son's life all of a sudden.

"Can you tell us about him, or do you have to remain silent for six months?"

"Well," Brian said, feeling like the schoolgirl he was, deep down inside. "His name's Callum, he's got beautiful brown eyes, a wonderful beard and mustache, a wicked smile, and he likes a lot of the same things I do. In fact, I need to remember to bring my Iggy Pop CDs when I see him this weekend." He found a small notepad on the coffee table, then rummaged for a pen and wrote a quick note to remind himself to take them to work the next morning.

"Where did you meet him?"

"At work, actually. We work in different areas of the department."

"Oh, no," his parents said in unison.

"I know. Work romance. He's a decent bloke but it doesn't even look like it's going to amount to anything serious. We're just dating, having an occasional pint after work, that sort of thing."

*Including rather decent man sex.*

"Well, it's nice to know you're seeing somebody," his father said. "We've always worried about you becoming lonely."

"We have," his mother added. "We were so worried when we found out I couldn't have any more children and your not having any playmates about the house. You adapted well, taking interest in your friends around the neighborhood and at school."

"Especially that Monty Swanson," Brian's father said.

"I'm fine. Really. I've always been fine by myself. And I'm a seemingly well-adjusted adult now. I've made it this far without any major collapse."

"True," his father said. "We're proud of the way you turned out and we're proud you're up for this promotion."

"Thanks, Dad, Mum." Brian checked the clock on his VCR. "Listen, I love you both to bits, but I need to get going."

"Goodness, is it that time already?" his mother asked in a joking fashion. "Mustn't keep you from your story."

"Says the ardent *Coronation Street* supporter," Brian said as he picked up his television remote and switched on the TV. "Love you both."

"Good night, dear," his mother said.

"Bye, Brian," his father added. "Good luck to you."

"Thanks again. Night." With that, they hung up and Brian turned his full attention to his television.

Which was suddenly full of images of an important World Cup match.

"Pre-empted? Bloody hell," Brian muttered. With the whine of a spoiled child that had been told St. Nick would never bring him an Action Man figure, he switched off the television and stomped off to the bathroom to bemoan his fate in a long, hot soak in the tub.

\* \* \* \*

Callum sat on the couch and stared at the phone on the table next to it. It was simple, really. Just pick up the phone, push the buttons on the front, hope they're in the sequence that matches his parents' phone number, wait for them to answer, have a conversation, hang up.

*So why can't I do it? How hard can it be to just ring them up to say "hallo"?*

Callum finally picked up the receiver and dialed his parents' number.

*Just let Mum answer.*

"Hallo?" a decidedly Mum-like voice said.

"Mum? It's Callum," he replied in what he'd hoped was a conversational tone.

"Well, goodness, dear. How are ye?" his mother asked, rather concerned. "I'm sorry about what happened between ye and Theresa."

"I'm adjusting."

"That's good."

"I've been keeping busy. I've been going out fer a pint here and there with a mate from work, gone to a few of the museums on the weekends."

"Glad to hear that. But nothing...nobody...?"

"No, Mum. Not really." Callum crossed his fingers and waited for the celestial thunderbolt that would reduce him to ashes for lying to his mother. "It just hasn't been right so soon after to pursue another serious relationship."

"Of course. Take yer time, dear. I know it hasn't been easy for ye."

"So, is Father about?"

"No, Callum. Thursday's dart league."

"That's right."

"Yer brother's here, though. Would ye like a quick word with him?"

*I'd rather shove needles in me eyes.*

"Sure. Put him on."

There was some shuffling in the background as his mother handed the phone over to his brother. "Callum?" he bellowed. "How ye doin', ye shithead?"

"Fine, Larry. Ye don't have to shout. Phone technology's improved. Besides, Mum's standing right next to ye. Ye know she doesn't like language."

"I know, Mum. I know. Sorry," Larry said, his voice quieter. Callum guessed he was apologizing for his vocabulary. Again. "What happened with ye and Theresa?"

"Things happen. People change."

"I hope ye din't get fucked over with the settlement. Ow! Mum!"

Callum rubbed his forehead. "Don't worry, Larry. I made out okay. The whole affair was rather friendly. Put Mum back on, will ye?"

"Sure thing, shithead. Mum! Stop it!" There was a bit of a scuffle as the phone was handed over. Callum's parents had neglected to tell him they had adopted Larry from a pack of a rare hybrid of rabid hyena and dingo.

Scratch that. Hyena and dingo had more class.

"I'm still yer mother, so don't think I won't smack ye like that again," Callum's mother said. Then to Callum, "I'm back, dear. Sorry fer the commotion."

"Well, I'd better get going. I just wanted to say 'hallo', let ye know I'm doing okay."

"It's always good to hear yer voice, Callum. I'll let yer father know ye called."

"Thanks, Mum. Good night."

"Night, dear."

They hung up, then Callum stared at the telephone again. The conversation with his parents was a long way off, he decided, so he could easily answer any relationship questions with convenient half answers: he wasn't involved seriously with anybody yet and it looked like he wouldn't be for a while.

Simple. As long as he was honest with Brian, that's all that mattered.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, Callum and Brian stopped in the canteen before work. "So begins the new regimen," Brian said as poured a cup of tea that was a bit larger than his usual. "Stop in before I begin working, take more tea so I make fewer trips down here..."

"And make more trips down to the loo," Callum interrupted.

"Good Lord, my parents were right. I'm becoming their worst nightmare. I'm turning into a corporate drone."

"It's yer dream, not theirs," Callum said as they left the canteen.

"They paid for my time at university. I owe them something."

"So we can't all become a director for Greenpeace or Head Vice President of Torture and Abuse for Amnesty International."

"I tried that on my gap year before university. I was about to go into law so I could be the little champion of justice my parents always wanted, right? Then I saw how long it would take and how much it would cost, so I decided to take the easy out and entered business administration."

"I see," Callum said as they stepped into an open lift car. "Ye could just run the local head office for Greenpeace or Amnesty International."

"Exactly. That's what I told them. It seemed to placate them for a while."

"And being the horrible child ye are, ye work here now."

"Well, the pay beats what Greenpeace were offering."

They reached their floor and when they got to Brian's desk, they found Natalie at hers. She seemed to be ignoring them harder than usual. "So, shall I come gather ye for lunch, then?"

"Sure. Sounds good. Natalie? Do you have the paper with you this morning?"

Natalie didn't bother to look up from her work. "It's in my desk," she said and implied it was to remain there until she was ready for it.

"Just a quick peek at this morning's headline, please?"

Natalie dropped her pen onto her desk. "Oh, all right."

As she opened her desk, Callum said to Brian, "Royalty."

Brian thought for a moment. "Another Elton John rant."

"Ooo! Specifics, then," Callum said, surprised. "Going fer all or nothing, then? Ye do remember this means ye buy today and all of next week if ye lose."

"Of course. Need to make the Friday Bonus Round interesting."

Natalie held up the newspaper. "'Her Maj Racks Up Seven Million Pound Security Tab During Oz State Visit.'"

"Damn! Double or nothing? We can pick up a copy of *The Sun* during lunch?" Brian asked, all but begging.

"Don't worry, mate." Callum pinched Brian's cheek. "I'm all fer going to the chippie, if ye want."

"How about we go to the Wimpy around the corner for a double cheeseburger?"

"Their chips are better. Sounds good, but Monday I choose and we stick to it, yeah?"

"Why do I have the feeling the next words out of your mouth are going to be 'American Steak House?'" Brian asked, his voice full of dread.

Natalie continued to glare at them as she put away the newspaper.



## Chapter Nine

After he'd gotten home, Callum put on a black t-shirt he'd bought on Brian's recommendation, then headed over to Whip Smart. After he paid his cover (the night's main attraction: Difficult Position), he made his way over to the bar. Or at least tried like hell. The club was a small affair, barely large enough to hold the crowd inside. Callum bought a bottle of cider then settled on a stool at the back to try and get a decent view of the band. It didn't work very well; everybody else was jostling for the same position.

After a short wait, the band came up on stage. The lead and rhythm guitar players seemed to sport the same closely cropped black or brown hair, the bass player's a bit shaggy and black. Hidden behind them all, however, was the drummer. Callum couldn't get a good enough look at him, but caught bright flashes of blue and red as they began their first number.

Callum was content to remain hidden in the back of the club, but that soon changed when he got a better look at the drummer. He filled his blue t-shirt with a fair amount of chest and arm muscle. His hair, mustache, and goatee were a brilliant copper red, and when he turned his head, Callum caught a glimpse of the ponytail that trailed down his back.

Transfixed, he slid off his stool and squeezed his way through the crowd, wanting to see Drummer's eyes. There were a few times where Drummer raised his arms over

his head and his blue t-shirt pulled back to reveal the smallest glimpses of underarm hair. His collar was low enough for Callum to see his chest hair and as they continued to play, Drummer's shirt darkened with sweat.

About halfway through, Callum spotted a small rainbow flag decal on one of Drummer's tom-toms and another that declared, "I'm not gay, but my boyfriend is." He smiled, buoyed by the sudden discovery. He figured that since he was a musician, there had to be no way the skin on Drummer's hands would be as soft as Brian's.

Callum stood so close to the band, he swore his eardrums would eventually burst and his brain would melt with the volume. The last time he'd heard a band live, the acoustics in the stadium made it all but impossible to understand. He doubted he'd have an easier time if he went to the back of the club, so he stayed put in the hope Drummer would look at him at least once.

No such luck, so after the performance, Callum found himself embarrassed and waiting in the alley behind the club. The club's rear door soon opened and the band emerged, the lead and rhythm guitar players followed by the bass player. Drummer brought up the rear and carried part of his kit. "Hallo, there," Callum said. "I just wanted to say ye guys were excellent."

Drummer stopped and looked at Callum.

*Terrific. Again with the blue eyes?*

"Hi, there," Drummer continued as he set his case down and held out his hand, his voice soft as it mesmerized Callum. "Thanks for stopping by tonight. Glad you enjoyed the show."

"I'm Callum MacInnes." Callum shook Drummer's hand, his skin very rough in patches but still warm and inviting.

"Simon Gower," Drummer said with a shy smile. "Scottish, I see. That's rather sexy."

Callum blushed. "Thanks."

"We were just going to stick around for a little while longer. Can I buy you a drink?"

"We were?" the bass player asked as he arched an eyebrow at Simon, a little surprised.

"Yes, we were, Avi," Simon answered. "That's Avi Tsumora, our bass player."

"How do you do?" Avi replied as he and Callum shook hands. "Always glad to meet one of our spectators. And toking up by the dustbins are Rob and Peter Ray." Their exact location was pinpointed by the lit ash of a joint. They nodded to Callum, who waved back.

"We still have to get the rest of our equipment out, so why don't you go back inside and wait for us?" Simon asked Callum.

"Sure. I'll see ye in a bit." Callum waved to everybody as he entered the club through the rear exit.

Back inside Whip Smart, Simon found Callum at the bar, still mesmerized by his huge eyes. "Right, then," Simon said and smiled. "What can I get you?"

"Cider, thanks."

"Pint of bitter and a cider, please," Simon called to the bartender.

"A bit small fer so much noise, innit?"

"Gives the punters what they want. Some booze, some loud music, everybody's happy."

The bartender handed Simon their drinks, so he and Callum went into the rear of the club. "Ye were really good," Callum said once more.

"Glad you appreciate it." Simon's smile turned Callum's knees to jelly. "First time here?"

"Aye. I had some free time this weekend and thought I'd pop on over."

Somebody found the jukebox up front and fired up Bruce Springsteen, so Simon moved a little closer. "It's pretty much home base for us," he said almost directly into Callum's ear. "Difficult Position does play other clubs but we're here most of the time."

The sensation of Simon's breath against his ear caused a minor swoon in Callum. He could hear Simon just fine, even with the jukebox, and realized his gut feeling might

have had some advantages, after all. "I'll probably stop by more often, then," he said, his cheek pressed against Simon's.

"Terrific." Simon quickly kissed Callum's ear, his lips warm and tender.

Callum put his hand on his ear with a smile and the two pulled away, only to stare at each other in silence.

*Why hasn't a hole opened up in the floor and sucked me in?*

The last call bell then rang and saved Callum from doing himself a mischief.

"Shit," Simon said, his quiet, shy voice making the word sexier than necessary. "I need to drop Rob and Peter off before Avi and I get home. Can I offer you a lift somewhere?"

Avi and Simon lived together? Damn. "Not to sound churlish, but I live right near by. I can just walk."

"Oh. Okay." Simon sounded disappointed.

"But I'd like to see ye again, if at all possible."

Simon brightened again. "That would be great."

Callum removed a business card case from his jacket and took out a card. "I'm usually available during the evenings, so if ye want to call, ye might catch me."

"I have to get going now, but I promise I will call." Surprising Callum, Simon leaned closer and gave him a quick kiss.

They stopped for a moment and stared at each other. "Great," Callum whispered. "I can't wait to hear from ye."

"Good night, now. And thanks again for stopping in," Simon said as he put on his jacket before he left the club.

Callum watched him as he left and when he was out of sight, Callum turned around, put his forehead on the wall, and kicked at the carpet. "Shite."

Well, he and Brian had agreed they didn't have a "serious" relationship. And Callum had said he was eventually going to meet other guys. But on the walk home, Callum thought about how honest his attraction to Simon was. Had he simply jumped at another bloke just because he was paying attention? Could he really trust himself

during such a time of change? Once home, he didn't bother to turn on any lights after he'd locked the door; he just went upstairs to bed, his clothes in a heap on the floor after he'd undressed.

*Thank God I din't wear those briefs I bought last week. Maybe I'll surprise Bri with them.*

Monday arrived, with it an odd assortment of emotions for Callum. Brian wasn't out front when he arrived, so he went up to their floor to check for any phone messages. When he didn't find any at reception, he continued to Brian's area and found him already at his desk, the largest mug Callum had ever seen in one hand as he read an open folder.

"Ready to launch the *Potemkin* there, mate?" he asked with a chuckle.

Startled, Brian looked up. "Yes," he said quickly, his eyes wide. "Yes. Hello. How are you?"

"Din't mean to spook ye, Bri. Are ye okay?"

"Sorry. I wasn't aware anybody else was here. Been here for an hour already, so I shouldn't be too shocked."

"An hour? What's gotten into ye, lad?"

Brian shook his head and picked up his mug again. "Nothing. Just...a little more due diligence. Can't I do that?"

"Not if ye want me to respect in the morning." Callum got a smile and a laugh from Brian, and his shoulders relaxed noticeably. "Care to come down to the canteen with me fer a refill?"

Brian was about to answer when they noticed Natalie had arrived, her stride less purposeful and off a beat when she'd seen they were there before her. "No, thanks," he said quietly as he and Natalie glared at each other.

"Okay," Callum replied, drawing it out. "I'll pop down on me own, then. Give us a call later if ye change yer mind."

"Will do." Natalie sat down as Brian stared at her over the rim of his mug. Callum shook his head and went back to the lifts before the tension got any more ridiculous.

The week became more hopeless as it wore on; not only did Callum have to endure Brian and Natalie as they stared at each other in a dare for somebody to make the first move, but Simon never called. All leads proved useless; there were too many similar names and initials listed in the phone directory, and Difficult Position wasn't scheduled to play Whip Smart for another two weeks. Crushed and confused, Callum hoped that if he let go, the universe would right itself.

The universe, as always, had other ideas and everything had reached an intolerable level by Thursday. Callum decided to put a stop to it after Natalie and Brian glared at each other in the hall as he and Callum were on their way back from the canteen.

"Enough," Callum muttered as he grabbed Brian by the elbow and pulled him into the gents'. "I'm going to ask ye one more time. Is everything all right?"

Brian glanced down and saw somebody in one of the stalls, so he dropped to a whisper. "Yes. No. I'm not sure. Look, I know we've always been honest with each other before, but I haven't been lately."

Callum's stomach knotted. "Oh?"

"You remember a little while back, when I told you that Fairmerchant called me into his office so Mrs. Yarrow could praise my work?"

"Aye."

"Well, I'd only told you half the story, but I'm under a gag order right now. If I breach the confidentiality, all this arriving on time and less farting around will have been for naught. I hope you aren't too upset."

Callum shook his head. "No, Bri. I wouldn't want ye to jeopardize yer job."

The toilet flushed so Brian and Callum waited for the other patron to disappear. "I can't shake the feeling Natalie is somehow involved," Brian said, still in a whisper.

"Well, stop breathing her air."

"If I didn't work with her so much, I'd ignore her more often."

"Just limit yer answers to 'aye,' 'no,' 'thank ye,' and 'piss off.' Ye can turn it into one great big round of 'well, she started it', if needed."

"Well, she did," Brian said with a sulk.

"How much longer do ye need to keep quiet?"

"About two more months."

"Ye've made it this long. What's two more months?"

"Enough time for me to break down sobbing during one of our weekly meetings," Brian replied as he and Callum left the restroom. Out in the hall, they met Natalie and Wanda Gale on their way to the canteen. "Afternoon," Brian said with a friendly nod as he and Callum walked to the lifts.

\* \* \* \*

Their earlier talk about honesty nagged Callum on the train ride home. He wondered if he needed to tell Simon about Brian first. Simon had to understand he didn't have a seriously committed relationship with Brian, and if he could convince Simon maybe he could convince himself of the same thing.

Maybe.

Callum dropped his briefcase on the kitchen table and didn't check for any messages from Simon right away. His frustration was compounded by the unexpected sheaf of files that Natalie had unceremoniously dumped into his in tray at the last possible minute. Since all of it had deadlines too close to ignore until the next day, it meant either overtime in his dreary office or in the comfort of home. As he went upstairs to change, he didn't know what good having a word with Fairmerchant would do, but it needed to be done.

Later, Callum rubbed his eyes, then checked his mug. Empty. He'd had the last of the tea. He felt incredibly put upon as he stood and took his mug into the kitchen to make another pot.

"Oh, Natalie," he muttered to himself as he filled the kettle and plugged it in. "Ye are so dead, little missy. Hell may hath no fury like a woman scorned, but a Scotsman denied his sleep comes pretty damn close."

He leaned against the counter and checked the clock. "Only 8:20?" he said to himself.

"It feels much later than that."

Just then, the phone rang and he answered it much quicker than he'd expected. "Hallo?" he said then laughed to himself.

"Hello, Callum?" a quiet, sexy voice asked. It was Simon, much to Callum's delight.

"Simon. I'm glad ye called."

"I would have called earlier, but my day job has me backed up."

"That's too bad. What do ye do?"

"I'm a manager at the HMV store in Leicester Square. We're short this week and I've closed every night except tonight."

"Lucky sod. I couldn't even escape mine tonight. I had to bring some work home."

"Is it much?"

"Of course not. Maybe about another three, four hours' worth."

Simon laughed. "Poor man. Am I interrupting?"

"Yer timing's good. I'm just waiting fer the kettle to boil." Callum paused, then rubbed his forehead with his free hand. "I'm glad ye called, Simon, because I need to talk to ye about something important."

"Oh?" Simon asked, a little worried.

"I'm not sure how ye feel about me, seeing as we've only just met, but I'm going through a rough patch right now."

"I see."

"First off, I've only recently come out. It happened shortly after me divorce."

"That is rough," Simon replied. "How long were you married?"

"Just over five years."

"Well, welcome to the club. I was married for ten."

"That must have been ugly."

"It was rather harsh, but I couldn't continue lying to her. Of course, nearly getting arrested for public indecency didn't help matters." Simon sighed before he continued. "I



would like to see you again, Callum. I'm just not sure when. Between HMV and Difficult Position, I'm really strapped for free time right now."

Once again, Callum decided to trust his instincts. He took a deep breath and plunged in, head first, expecting a broken neck. "I'm fine with that, Simon. I'd like to see ye again, too, but I need to explain something first, so let me have a chance to speak before ye say anything, okay?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"It's kind of an odd arrangement, but I'm current seeing somebody. At work. See. He understands that while I love and care for him deeply, it's nothing to warrant the two of us seeing each other exclusively. So while I'm seeing Bri, he won't be upset if I started seeing other blokes. He really wants what's best for me and has been encouraging me to go with me gut. It hasn't failed me yet, so I guess what I'm saying is yes, I'd like to see ye again but I am seeing somebody at the moment but it won't cause any trouble if I started seeing ye. Okay?" His head spinning from lack of oxygen, Callum finally stopped and took a deep breath.

"Wow," Simon replied with a small laugh. "Punctuation is your friend, you know."

Callum also laughed. "Sorry. I just needed to get that out."

"Okay."

"Okay?" Callum couldn't believe what he'd just heard. "To which?"

"All of it. Okay, I understand you've just come out, you're recently divorced, and you're intimately, but not romantically, involved with a co-worker, but okay, I'd still like to see you."

"Really?" Callum asked with a little crack in his voice.

"On the condition that you're as brutally honest with Brian as you have been with me. You don't want to sneak around, trust me."

"Aye. I will be. I just needed to see what ye had to say."

"Promise me one more thing, though."

"Sure. What's that?"

Simon chuckled. "*Please* edit that speech before you give it to Brian."

"I will. Promise."

"Thank you for being honest, Callum. I'd rather know now than six months from now. Listen, Difficult Position will be playing at Whip Smart weekend next, so I'll put yours and Brian's names on the guest list, okay?"

"Sounds good, Simon."

"I'll let you go, then. I'll try calling again next week. I'll have a better handle on my free time so we can plan on something then, yeah?"

"Thanks, Simon. It was good hearing from ye."

"Take care, Callum. Bye now."

Callum finally made another pot of tea, then carried it and his mug back to the dining table. As he let the tea steep, he picked up the next file, opened it, and began to read the contents. "Jesus Christ, what the hell have I just talked myself into?" he shouted and dropped the file. "I hate me life right now," he muttered as he put his forehead on the table with a dull thud.

## Chapter Ten

Several people milled about on the walk outside Whip Smart as Brian and Callum approached. Their cigarette smoke was caught in bluish-grey swirls in the lights over the entrance.

"I think you'll like the band," Callum said. "I had a chance to speak to them the last time I was here."

"Really? Anybody cute?"

"Well, I noticed the drummer and bass player. The lead and rhythm guitar players looked too shifty for my tastes."

"Bass player, you say? Great. Maybe we could double."

"Ye know, it's funny ye should say that, Bri," Callum said, a little too breezily as he released Brian's hand. "I had a chance to talk with the drummer, and I think he might want to go out with me."

Brian hadn't expected to feel so hesitant. They'd discussed what was going on between them...sort of. Just a friendly thing; nothing really serious. But Callum had met somebody else? No wonder his teeth were suddenly on edge. He hoped the growing apprehension wasn't going to ruin his evening. "Really? That's great. You'll be getting out, interacting with other men and finally learning who you are."

"So, ye aren't disappointed?"

"No. Lots of gay men date...lots of gay men. Hell, I've known guys who've juggled two or three swains at the same time."

*But not me.*

"So, ye aren't disappointed."

"Callum, I'm not." Brian's stomach tightened over his little white lie. Again. "I'd rather you told me about it than feel you have to sneak around behind my back. Remember? I've always asked you to be honest with me."

"I just din't want ye to be jealous."

"Not hardly. Just remember that no matter what happens, I'll always be your friend." Brian hugged Callum again then kissed his temple and hoped the increased contact would soothe his nerves.

They stopped at the front ticket window. "Hallo, two fer Callum MacInnes," he said to the woman behind the window.

"Just a second," she said and checked her list. After she found his name, she reached up and pulled down an envelope that had been taped to the wall. "Here. Simon asked me to give you this if you came by tonight. Go on in."

"Thanks."

"What's wrong?"

"Not sure yet." Callum opened the envelope and removed a note. He read it, then muttered, "Damn. They aren't playing tonight. Their manager booked them out in Brighton and it'll be another three weeks before they're back."

"Did you want to go?"

"No, Simon was kind enough to put us on the guest list. Let's just stay long enough to see what tonight's band is like. One or two songs and then we can leave."

Two songs were enough for them. They watched the band in abject disbelief and after the second song, they glanced at each other. The expressions on their faces said everything so they set their half finished drinks on the table in front of them before slowly made their way through the equally unappreciative (and more vocal) crowd.

Once outside Whip Smart, Brian turned to Callum and said quietly, "I was under the impression that this Simon bloke actually liked you."

Inside, Brian breathed a huge sigh of relief. Just that much longer before he would have to meet Simon. Like he needed the continued pressure.

"If I weren't already so upset about Simon not playing tonight, I probably would be, after having to listen to that. Good Laird, they give untalented amateurs a bad name." Callum leaned against the wall, just next to the club's entrance. "Damn."

"Hey, come on."

"I know, I know. I'm acting like a silly schoolgirl."

"No, you aren't."

"It's not like he did this on purpose."

"I can be mad at him, too, if you'd like. Look." Brian made an unconvincing snarl. "Grr?"

Callum arched one eyebrow and slowly shook his head as he tried not to laugh.

"After all," Brian continued, "if he had shown up, we wouldn't have been aurally assaulted."

"I'll find a lawyer on the Internet tonight and we can sue Simon for emotional distress."

"We can also sue the band for false advertising." Brian hugged Callum. "Feeling better?"

"A bit. Christ, Bri. I've only just met him. Why am I all twisted up inside because of this little mishap?"

"Because you think he's an interesting geezer, you want to get to know him better and tonight was your first chance to possibly talk to him in person more."

"Is it always this depressing to be stood up?"

"Very. The first time it happened, he was supposed to meet me after a cricket match. Midnight happened, one o'clock passed, followed by half past two. I finally gave up around three and went to bed, wondering what the hell happened. He'd had a few too many during the victory celebration that was going to be our first date and had to get a ride home. He left his car at the grounds until the next day and had forgotten my number in his car."

"Did ye ever see him again?"

"Once. Long enough for him to say he was leaving me for the ex he'd broken up with about six months before the cricket match."

"Ye poor bastard," Callum said with a chuckle. "Having somebody leave ye is one thing, but for an ex?"

"I ran into him about three years later. Fortified with one pint of bitter too many, he had the unmitigated balls to ask me if we could start seeing each other again."

"So, what did ye do?"

"Fucked the daylights out of him before I laughed in his face and said 'no,' which was too bad. It was probably some of the best sex I've ever had. Glad I called it off, though. The prick shaved his stomach hair and the two times we'd slept together, I always seemed to catch him with three days' worth of stubble."

"Okay, Bri. Ye can stop now."

"Don't worry. Story time's over."

"Come on. Let's go back to yer place. We've got a bit of a train ride ahead of us." Brian's arm still across Callum's shoulders, they began the walk back to Callum's house. "And Bri?"

"Yes?"

"If ye ever decide to shave any of yer bits, let me know so I can either plan on being killed in a mysterious train wreck or suddenly decide I need to be in Australia."

"Don't worry. I haven't shaved anything since I lost that bet and shaved my arse." Brian paused. "Although..."

"What?" Callum asked, not entirely certain he was ready for the answer.

"I could tell you about the summer I shaved my pubic hair on an almost daily basis."

"Suddenly, Bri, I've forgotten I even know ye."

"Oh, come, come now, Callum. I was twenty-three. I was young, brazen —"

"Prone to shaving various bits of yer body on a dare."

"Oh, that was no dare or lost bet. That was mad, impetuous whim."

Back at Brian's flat, they sat on the couch, Callum with his feet on Brian's lap. He'd removed his shoes, and Brian rubbed his feet as they quietly chatted and flipped through television channels, finding they had more interest in the network bumpers than the actual programming.

"Must be later than we realized," Callum said and checked his watch. "The only thing worse than early morning telly is late night."

Brian slid his hand up a leg of Callum's jeans to rub his calf. "Good Lord, it's like rock in there."

"I've been neglecting it for the longest time, unfortunately. Maybe once me head is cleared out, I can think about going to the gym again."

"Let me know. I could probably be your partner."

Callum sat up. "Not that I'm biased or anything, but ye're one of the last I'd expect to ever need to exercise."

"I just want to build up a little more definition." Brian flexed a bicep to prove his point.

"Aye, I've seen the way ye eat. I'll have ye know we've got a running office pool fer every Christmas party and how many trips ye make to the buffet."

"That's not fair!"

"I won the year ye made a record six trips. Easiest two hundred quid I ever made."

Brian moved closer so Callum's knees were just over his lap. "I pace myself. One plate is the cheeses and crisps, one is the veggies and dip, the next is the meats and eggs..."

"And the next three or four are the biscuits, sweeties, cakes and everything with the word 'chocolate' in the recipe."

"Am I the only one who values his or her time at those parties?" Brian asked with a scoff.

"Ye're the only form of entertainment we have. None of us can believe how much ye put away."

"Next time you win, I expect half the take."

"Come on," Callum said as he stood and held his hand out to Brian. "Let's take ye and yer champion stomach off to bed." As Brian stood and took Callum's hand, he managed a belch. "I'll take that as an editorial comment."

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, Brian stood in the bedroom doorway and watched Callum. The blankets had pulled down to just to the top of his ass and exposed the tops of his two wonderfully solid, incredibly hairy mounds of his cheeks. Brian got back into bed and lay on top of Callum, the blankets between them as a safety barrier.

"Yer bed is so comfortable," Callum said. "It's too easy to fall asleep as soon as I lay down."

Brian kissed the back of Callum's neck. "Like last night?"

"I hope ye weren't insulted or anything."

"Of course not. I would've been much more upset if you had fallen asleep in the middle of something. You don't know what it's like to be sucking a guy's cock and finding out the reason why he can't keep it up is because he's dozed off. Loudly." Brian kissed Callum's ear then joined him again under the blankets. "By the way, have you gotten down to M&S like you'd promised?"

"Aye," Callum all but whispered, embarrassed.

"And?"

"I brought them with me."

"And?"

"And they're in me overnight bag."

"Well? Put them on! I'd like to see them."

Callum groaned. "Do I have to? I'll feel like such a fool."

"Nonsense. It's just me. No hidden cameras."

"Okay." Callum got out of bed, picked up his overnight bag, and took out a pair of green briefs. He put them on, then stepped toward the bed. "Well?"



"Oh, my God. Those are great."

"Really?"

"Yeah. In fact, they're perfect."

"Really? Are ye sure?"

"Yeah. I've been looking for a pair that color for the longest time."

Callum walked away from the bed. "I'm taking them off now."

"No, no, no, Callum, come back here." Brian waved Callum back. "Come on. Please."

"Bri, I feel silly in these."

"Nonsense. You look fine."

"Really?"

"Honest. For a bloke who doesn't know anything about briefs, you actually did pick a great pair. Right cut, right height, right color. They're fantastic on you."

"Yeah, but me arse itches like the devil." Callum scratched himself to prove his point.

"I'm not surprised, a butt that hairy."

Callum got back in bed. "And I was right. Everything's all bunched up funny. I can feel me bits creeping about."

"But they're sexy on you."

"Hallo? Protestant?"

Brian put his arms around Callum. "Everything's moving too quickly for you."

"Aye, just a tad."

"I'm sorry. I've just waited so long for this moment, I keep forgetting you're not the Callum of my fantasies."

"Well, I'm trying."

"Actually, I think I like the real life Callum more than the one of my fantasies. You're simply being yourself. It's rather refreshing when a bloke is honest about who he is. You'll be quite the surprise when you strike out on your own. You're the rare 'honest,

funny, caring individual' I read about in so many personals ads. So many men want to be somebody like you. So many men want to have somebody like you."

"I've spent the last five or so years of me life trying to be something I wasn't, so I think I'm ready to change that. Jesus Christ, it's like learning a foreign language."

"You'll be fine." Brian hugged Callum then kissed his temple.

*Stop being so fucking wonderful. You're too nice. Stop it, stop it, stop it!*

He rested his cheek on the spot he'd just kissed.

*No. Don't. Don't ever stop being this wonderful.*

## Chapter Eleven

The evening had begun to cool down as Callum left work. As he brought his hand up to shield his eyes from the sudden brightness of the sun, he stopped in surprise when he found Simon on the front walk. He had his hands in his pockets and a sad, worried expression. "I am so sorry, Callum," he said quietly. "That really was not the best way to make a first impression, was it?"

"No," Callum replied, also quiet. "But I understand."

Simon stepped closer and crossed his arms. "It's not always like that. Our manager's been the best the whole time we've worked with her, but this is the first time she's ever fucked up on such a monumental scale. She'd mixed up the Brighton date with Whip Smart next month."

Callum softened a little. "Thanks fer leaving the note at least. It would have been worse if ye hadn't."

"Did you and Brian still stay for the show?"

"Two songs. Long enough to realize how terrible they were."

"Can I make it up to you somehow? There's a bank holiday next week. Would you like to get together then?"

"Aye. That'd be great."

"Terrific." He kissed Callum's forehead. "I'll call you Thursday, all right?"

"Sure."

"I'll let you go, then. I have to get back to the store, anyway. They've probably just figured out I've gone missing and trying to plot a coup."

"Thanks again fer stopping by."

"Have a good night." Simon kissed Callum's cheek then sprinted down the walk to catch the Tube back to HMV.

"Night, Simon," Callum replied to nobody. He couldn't have stayed angry with Simon for very long. He did apologize, after all, which was a huge plus in Callum's book. With a contented sigh, he walked to the Tube stop, buoyed by the fact that even the few minutes they'd been together were enough.

When Callum met him the next morning, Brian was in his usual morning mood with a new M&S bag in his grasp.

"Oh, Bri. What are we going to do with ye?"

"Relax. It's not the usual. I was thinking about what we were discussing the other day and I've decided to do something about it."

"Ye bought an electric shaver and are going to do yer arse during lunch," Callum muttered under his breath.

"We will pretend we did not hear that."

At their floor, Natalie saw them down the hall and then turned and walked away. "I'll tell ye when it's a little safer," he whispered.

"Oh, my." Brian clapped his hands in glee. "Office intrigue."

"Ye might say that."

They reached Brian's desk, with no Natalie in sight. "I'll stash this and we can make a quick run downstairs." Brian put his bag in a drawer before he and Callum quickly turned and all but ran back to the lifts. "Okay, Callum. Details."

"Well, I'm not one to gossip," Callum said as they leaned closer, "but I had to talk to Fairmerchant about that huge pile Natalie gave me a bit ago. Ye know how he feels about us taking work home and he let me have it over that, but I reminded him if I'd let it sit, half of it would have missed deadline. It looks like he's finally had a chance to have a friendly chat with her."

"I would've done the same. What she did wasn't fair."

"So now she's going to make sure we see her ignoring us."

"What fun. What's next? Thumb tacks on the chair? Liquid soap in my jacket pocket? Those tricks are a lot more mature."

"If she wants to play at it, she's seen I can hit back."

"Have at her."

"So what item that is decidedly not man panties did ye have to buy this morning?" Callum asked as the lift doors opened and they stepped out.

"I just picked out some workout gear. Some shorts, shirts, shoes. Nothing much," Brian said as they turned toward the canteen.

"I think me gym membership's still valid, considering they've been deducting seventy five quid a month fer the last year, even though I haven't been there."

"They have your money. Why should they complain?"

"I'll call, just to make sure. If so, let's plan on tomorrow."

"Sounds good."

Later that afternoon, the few folders that still sat on Callum's desk required Natalie's signature. To creatively waste time he tapped down the contents around every available edge of the folders. When he felt they were suitable for presentation, he stood and walked over to Natalie. She was engrossed in her own pile of folders, so Callum politely and quietly asked, "Natalie?"

She looked up at him with an angry fire in her eyes. "Yes? May I help you?"

Callum ignored the reception. "I just need yer signature on these."

Natalie snatched the folders from his hand, flipped them open and scribbled her name on the required pages. She snapped them shut and thrust them back at Callum. "Will there be anything else?"

"I'll just take these upstairs. Thanks again."

\* \* \* \*

Callum confirmed his membership at the gym was still valid, so he and Brian met there the next evening after work. As they changed, Brian watched the movement of Callum's back and leg muscles as he put on a sleeveless grey shirt and yellow track shorts. Two blokes across the way, both with square, stocky, and somewhat hairy frames similar to Callum's had appreciative smiles as Callum brought his foot up to the bench and tied his shoe. One of *those* nights. He patted Callum's ass as he walked by. "Ready when you are, mate."

Out on the main floor, Callum and Brian found every machine and weight bench in use. "Busy night," Callum said as he leaned closer to Brian so he could be heard over the din. "I'm not sure if this was such a good idea."

"Well, it is Thursday. Everybody's trying to get in that last quick workout before the weekend."

"Aye, lest they turn back pumpkins on Monday if they're still single."

"Smell that? That's the heady scent of sweat and desperation."

"Combined with disinfectant and wanton lust, it makes for an irresistible combination. Evening," Callum said to the gentleman behind the customer service counter. "I'm Callum MacInnes. Me friend and I have an appointment with a trainer."

The guy's pause was almost imperceptible, and Brian caught a flicker at his frisky brown mustache before he offered his hand to Callum. His tattered t-shirt had been strategically torn for maximum nipple exposure and his grey shorts were chosen for the way they shaped and displayed his crotch. Completely professional attire for a gym. Brian tried to keep from laughing.

"Hello, Mr. MacInnes," the guy said in an intimate tone as he and Callum shook hands. "I'm Even McDylan and I'll be assisting you and your friend this evening."

Callum released Even's hand. "And this is Brian Parker-Eddy."

"Hello, Mr. McDylan," Brian said with his best business suit smile. He usually saved it for pushy salespeople and insufferable coworkers in tandem with "I'll have to think about it" when he really meant "The hell I will."

"Well," Even continued, releasing Brian's hand as if he suddenly remembered Callum were there. "If you gents could let me know what I can do for you, I can get you started."

As Callum described how he hadn't worked out in ages and Brian told him he had hoped to build some definition, Brian noticed how Even regarded them with an almost devout devotion, as if lost in their eyes. Already bored, Brian began to blink at a higher rate than normal to throw the guy off.

It must have worked better than Brian had planned because while Even had stressed that a workout buddy could help benefit exercise, he put Brian on some of the slower, more solitary machines and spent more time with Callum on the more complicated weight lifting devices. During the final turn on a stationary bicycle, Brian noticed Even was at full attention and couldn't remain so stoic any longer. He crossed his arms over the grip, put his head down and started laughing.

After Brian was moved to a treadmill, another solitary experience, Even put Callum on a leg press machine. As Brian watched them, a strange twinge settled in his stomach. Callum seemed to be completely oblivious to the attention but Brian's guard had gone up with the way Even inched his way closer to Callum. As he plodded on the treadmill, Brian saw how Even made it a point to lean over a couple times to correct the placement of Callum's feet or range of motion.

*Steady now. We'll be out soon enough. Besides, Callum's handling himself just fine.*

Callum soon stood and wiped his face with a towel. Even lightly traced his fingertip on the back of Callum's thigh. He cupped his hand on Callum's ass for a quick second and Callum faced Even and flicked the tip of Even's nose with his forefinger, laughing.

Brian stepped off the treadmill to join Callum and Even, and pushed Even back by the shoulder. "Oy. Muscles McGee. Care to keep it a bit more professional, yeah?"

"I'm sorry?" Even asked, clearly stunned Brian had touched him.

"Bri, I'm fine." Callum folded his arms.

Brian ignored Callum. "I believe the gentleman made it clear earlier he doesn't need you groping his bits."

"Now, wait just a... You honestly don't think..."

"Yeah. I honestly *do* think."

"Well, there has obviously been some misunderstanding, mates. Just trying to do my job and everybody is misreading my intentions."

"Well, I did bop yer nose," Callum replied.

"Okay. Look. Everybody is getting wound up over nothing. How about I give you a copy of the trainers' schedule on your way out? You clearly have some issues with me so next time, you can come in when I'm not here. Okay? Well. We're finished here so let's hit the showers and call it done." Even gave Brian a covert wink before he went into the trainers' office.

"I swear," Callum said when he was gone, "the rat bastard was dry humping the back of me head while I was on the incline bench."

Brian crossed his arms and glared at the office door. "I know it's your money, but I think it might be time for you to look for a new gym."

"Ye think?" Callum asked, puzzled. "I wasn't aware I needed yer permission."

"What? No. Not like that." He shrugged. "You have to admit it was rather cheesy."

"Well, knowing when he's here can only help us avoid him. But what the hell was that all about?"

"Sorry. Got a little carried away there. The stupid prat didn't seem willing to take 'no' for an answer, so I just thought...you know... Thought I'd play the attractive hired goon."

They turned to head back to the locker room. "If anything, I thought ye were playing the jealous boyfriend."

"I've found there's usually very little difference. They wind up costing the same, in the end." Before the locker room door closed behind them, Brian caught a glimpse of Even as he watched them from the office. Brian paused long enough to flip a one-finger salute before he let the door close behind them.

"What the hell was that about?" Callum asked, a bit surprised.

"Right up my nose."



"He hasn't done anything to ye, has he?"

"No. Just trying to drive the point home, is all."

"Ye could have just called him out to the football pitch after study period and thumped him then."

"I don't know. Maybe coming here was a bad idea."

"Christ, Bri. We had no idea he was going to pounce on me like that. Besides, I'm not a teenager that needs constant monitoring."

"I know that."

"So why are ye getting so upset?"

"You. Him. Me. Us."

"Okay. That's a start."

"I'm getting mad at you because it doesn't feel like you're appreciating my efforts at defending your honor, him for acting like such a prat, me for feeling this way, and us... well...just because."

Frustrated, Callum rubbed his hands over his face. "Bri, I'm not trying to discount what you have to say, but can it wait until we've changed and gotten out of here?"

"You've right. I'm just being silly."

"Did I say that?"

"Sounded like it."

"I said nothing of the sort!" Callum replied loudly and caused several people to turn in their direction. "I do want to talk about it but just not here," he continued in a quieter tone as the embarrassment crept over his face.

"Sorry. Just a little carried away in the moment," Brian whispered.

"Sorry fer shouting. Let's shower and change, then we can head out for dinner. On me."

"I'll be ready in about fifteen minutes." Callum went to his locker while Brian stopped at a sink, turned on the cold water, and splashed some on his face.

*Christ, what caused me to snap like that?*

He shook some water from his fingers and rubbed his face some more to help it dry.

*Maybe I am turning into the jealous boyfriend.*

He heard somebody stop behind him and wasn't too surprised when he looked in the mirror to find Even. "What's up, mate?"

Even held out his hand. "Just wanted to apologize again. Probably not the best time or place."

"Sure. No worries." Brian shook his hand.

"Oh, my. Nice hand. Soft skin."

"Thanks." Brian pulled his hand away and cautiously put it behind his back.

"What do you do?"

"I work for a financial advisor."

"Wow. Desk work and you're still pretty fit."

Brian shrugged. "I've had my moments."

"So are you up for a drink tonight?"

"Nah." Brian shook his head. "Plans."

"Some other time, then?"

Brian finally gave up and cranked the ice queen routine a notch or two. "No. Thank you."

"Come on, Brian. You can't be that oblivious to how hot you are."

With a small snort, Brian laughed at Even and his high cheese factor. "I've been told that, yes, but I don't dwell on it."

"Well, I do."

Brian pinched Even's cheek. "Let it go, dear. I'm here with somebody."

"What? Who? Mr. MacInnes?" Even pointed over his shoulder back into the locker room. "He's okay, I guess. But you do have your pick of any of the guys here."

"I am not here to pull anybody, okay? Callum and I wanted to have a little exercise but it's turning into an unwelcome display off male ego and hormone flexing."

Even turned on the charm and took a step closer to Brian. "Come on," he whispered. "Just one dinner date. All I ask."

"Don't make me smack your nose and yell at you like you're a puppy that just piddled on the carpet, because I will do it. I'm past forty and I have no shame left."

With a smirk, Even took another step toward Brian. "Come on. I dare you. Come on."

Without another thought, Brian smacked Even's nose with his fingertips. As Even brought his hand to his face, stunned and trying to recover, Brian shouted, "No! No, no, no, no, no! Bad puppy! Bad, bad puppy!", clapping his hands and stamping his foot with each word.

"Christ, you are fucking nuts!" Even stepped out of Brian's way and checked for any blood. "Fucking nuts."

A few of the other men in the locker room had begun to gather by the sinks to see what was going on. "You got that right, asshole," Brian said and pointed his finger into Even's face before he headed for his locker.

He passed Callum on his way to the showers. "What the hell was that about a puppy?"

"Nothing much," Brian said as his heart pounded. "Just saying goodbye to Even."

"I hope ye din't break anything."

"Just bruised his ego. I'll meet you over in the showers."

"See ye in a bit then," Callum said as Even walked by them on his way out, his cheeks and eyes a little red. He watched them as he left and gave them a wide berth. "Good Laird, man. I think ye've scarred him fer life."

"I usually have that effect on men."

After they'd showered and changed, Callum and Brian left the gym and went to a steak house down the road. After the waiter brought their wine, Callum asked, "Are ye feeling better?"

"Yeah. A little bit."

"A little more focused on what was bothering you, then?"

"Yeah. I guess...I got a little jealous when Even wouldn't leave you alone."

"Bri..."

"I thought it was amusing at first but I got mad as he pressed on."

"So ye were defending me honor, then."

"It didn't help he tried to deny everything. I know I'm not the center of the universe but I really felt abandoned."

"And ignored?"

"And ignored. I swear, Callum. I'm usually much more stable than this," Brian said, embarrassed.

"I know. I've seen it."

"Of course, I'm not all that surprised Even threw himself at you the way he did."

Brian groaned a little. "Callum, please. Don't. I'm just a really good dresser, is all," he said, blushing.

"Even in a gym."

"While I do appreciate the compliment, I'm not the standard by which all others are measured. And for everything you point out in me you find attractive, I can say the same about you."

"Thanks."

"And for every knob that throws himself at me I can reassure you there will be one doing the same to you. What's his name? Simon?"

"I threw meself at him."

Brian's heart sank a little. He hadn't mentioned that before, had he?

"But did he run? You lucked out when you met another guy who happened to be interested in you." His hands shook a little as he continued. "For every one like him, there's going to be at least four who'll shoot you down cold."

"Aye, he did ask me out fer the bank holiday next week, so I must have done something right."

"Yes?" Brian had a sip of wine and hoped his glass obscured his face and hid some of his emotion.

*It just gets better and better. Wonder if it's too late to engineer an excuse to have Callum come along with me to my parents' place and keep him away from this Simon person.*

"Great. You'll have a chance to get to know him better."

"That's what I'm hoping," Callum said.

"My pleasure." Brian kissed the back of Callum's hand.

"But those man panties do make me arse itch so I don't plan on wearing them for a while," Callum muttered as the waiter brought their plates to the table.

"You don't have to keep wearing them on my account. You can switch back to your boring, plain, shapeless, blah boxer shorts." Brian picked up his fork and knife. "But there is a third alternative."

"Aye?"

Brian made a cutting motor in the air with his knife. "Buzz, buzz, buzz."

Callum arched an eyebrow. "No more wine fer ye tonight, mister."

## Chapter Twelve

"I'm sorry fer fretting, Bri," Callum said as he and Brian crossed the main lobby toward the freedom of the holiday weekend. "I just feel like I'm abandoning ye."

"You aren't," Brian replied in what he hoped was a reassuring tone. "Take the time to get to know Simon. It sounds like there's plenty of potential there for you to at least make a new friend."

"But what if I say or do something stupid?"

"You won't. Just be your usual sweet self and he'll be charmed in no time." Brian wondered how much longer he could offer Callum such advice without getting sick. He could only hope to be the lucky one and things wouldn't work out with Simon. If he tried to sabotage any of it, he risked losing Callum entirely. So, Brian wished for an orca to drop from the sky and crush them where they stood, thereby solving all of his problems.

"Thanks, Bri."

"What are your plans, if I may ask?"

"Dinner and a movie tomorrow night and over to his place for dinner Sunday."

"He's cooking for you? Already?"

"I wasn't aware we'd have to wait."

"Well, how much he likes you depends on the complexity of the meal."

"Bri, I have the feeling ye're pulling all of these rules out of yer arse and it's not helping me."

"Yeah, you're right. The night of your divorce I made oatmeal and I like you tons." He fussed with Callum's collar and tie and brushed imaginary lint off his shoulders. "Now, remember what Mother's been telling you. Go with your instincts. Don't let yourself miss any sort of opportunity because you'll be kicking yourself in the arse until your final days."

Brian's stomach knotted with each positive word he spoke, certain it was a matter of time before he vomited.

Callum cleared his throat and leaned closer. "How do I invite him over for the night or turn him down if he asks?"

Brian crossed his arms. "Well, it's simple manners, actually. A polite 'would you care to spend the night?' usually works. Sometimes the implication is there, so it just happens. Now, if you do turn him down, make sure you call within the next forty-eight hours so he'll understand the one night wasn't going to work out and you're still genuinely interested in seeing him."

"Thanks."

"Now, go. I've got to get a few things for the trip to my parents' place, so I'll see you off now."

They exchanged a quick kiss and Callum spotted a surprised Natalie on the front walk with them. "Evening."

"Good night, Natalie." Brian nodded.

Her mouth open in shock, Natalie looked back and forth between them. She closed her mouth and shook her head before she stalked away with a shudder.

"We've made somebody's weekend," Brian said as he watched Natalie.

"Twenty quid says it'll be the hot topic when we return on Tuesday."

"Oh, please. Sucker's bet. But what are the chances one or both of us have another special conversation with Fairmerchant come Wednesday?"

"Ye don't think..."

"About the worst that can happen is Natalie goes home and prays our souls are saved from eternal damnation."

"Or her head finally explodes." Callum gave Brian another hug. "See ye Tuesday morning, then?"

"Tuesday morning, I want nothing but happy stories from you."

"I'll try," Callum said and they walked toward their Tube stations.

Down at the entrance turnstiles, out of sight of Callum and everybody else, Brian leaned against the wall and took a deep breath.

"Damnit!" He hit the wall with his fist. He rubbed his hands over his face then walked to a turnstile and inserted his pass. Sure, he'd told Callum he wasn't the standard by which all others are measured but now he just needed to convince himself.

\* \* \* \*

"I just don't get it, Simon," Avi said as he and Simon left Buy & Leave. "You've got plenty of nice clothes."

Simon opened his can of Coke. "I just need a new jacket or something. I'm taking Callum out tonight and I want to look nicer than usual."

"So you're going to spend seventy-five pounds on a jacket you're only going to wear once."

"Who says I will?"

Avi held up his hand to stop him. "One hundred twenty-five quid on a pair of boots worn for a date with a bloke you met at your store. Another eighty on a pair of slacks worn on a blind date your sister set you up with. Twenty-five more on a purple silk thong worn on a date that stood you up. I'll continue, if you like."

"Fine. I'll wear all that with my new jacket tonight."

"Wear it with the thirty-five pound black t-shirt you wore on a date to an office Christmas party, and I'll shut it."

"Do I even still have that shirt?" Simon asked thoughtfully.

"It's on a hanger, in your closet, next to the black jeans you paid one hundred and fifty pounds for to take a date to an eighties retro night at G.A.Y."



"I have black jeans?" He shook his head. "Well, as long as everything still fits, I'll just get a black jacket and complete the ensemble."

"Oh, be different. Get a grey jacket and a burgundy pocket silk for contrast."

"I've already got the pocket silk. Bought it for fifty pence at a charity shop and wore it only once for an employee of the year dinner at work."

"Did you bring a date?"

"No."

"Then it doesn't count against the final tally." Avi suddenly stopped, grabbing Simon by the wrist. "Wait. Having a pocket silk implies you've already got a jacket of some sort."

"One, it no longer fits. Two, it's navy with gold buttons. The burgundy didn't go very well with them."

"Christ, you are such a girl." Avi mussed Simon's hair and gave him a push to make him start walking again.

"No, I'm gay, so I therefore have fabulous taste in clothes. It's all over the telly."

After having decided on a charcoal grey jacket (black buttons), Simon inspected himself in the mirror. "I'm surprised the jeans and shirt still fit. I've had them for how long?"

"Oh, please. Your weight's hardly changed in the time I've known you," Avi said.

"So, do I look okay?" Simon turned to face Avi.

"You look fine."

"Is the jacket too much?"

"Not for a first date."

"Good." Simon turned back to the mirror and adjusted his pocket silk. "I just want everything to be nice."

"Why is it, though, you usually don't go out with a bloke more than once? You've got the entire package: you're smart, talented, funny, attractive, you've got a great smile and all your teeth."

"I'm a smart dresser. I'm not sure." Simon paused. "I'm not all that exacting in what I look for in another man, am I?"

"Maybe the others just didn't have all the qualities you're looking for."

"That's possible. Maybe I shouldn't be too excited about going out with Callum, then."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. The stars and planets could finally be in perfect alignment."

Simon crossed his arms. "Yeah, I guess. Don't want to wreck it before he sees the jacket I bought just for this date only."

"That's the spirit." Avi checked at the clock. "Hey, you'd better get going."

"Holy shit. Is it that late already?" He grabbed his keys off his dresser. "I'm not sure when I'll be back, so don't wait up."

"I never do," Avi called after him.

Simon arrived at Callum's house ten minutes early, so he sat out in the van. To pass the time, he checking his watch every two minutes. As the scheduled meeting time moved closer, Simon became a little more excited. *Maybe inviting him to Whip Smart wasn't such a good idea, after all. This time, we'll be able to sit and talk, get to know each other, and not have to shout over the din of a music club.*

The appointed time finally arrived, so Simon got out of the van and went to Callum's front door and rang the bell. Callum smiled when he saw him. "Hallo, there," he said. "Come on in."

Simon swooned a little over Callum's accent as he stepped inside. They paused for a moment then exchanged an awkward hug. "You look great," Simon said, Callum dressed in a black shirt and slacks. "We're almost twinsies."

"Thanks. Ye look great yerself. Was that ye I saw pull up earlier?"

"Uh, yeah. I hope you didn't mind if I waited. I didn't want to be too early."

"No, but I've been ready for the last hour, pacing the floor and waiting fer ye to show up. I sort of wish ye had rung the bell sooner."

"I'm sorry." He reached out and took Callum's hand, then rubbed the back of it with his thumb. "Shall we?"

"Surely." Neither made any attempts to leave; instead they looked into each other's eyes. Finally, Callum took a small step forward and lightly kissed Simon.

Simon's nervousness faded. "Oh, my. Come on. Let's go." He gave Callum's hand a friendly squeeze.

They arrived at the restaurant and held hands as they left Simon's van.

"I never figured on going out so quickly with anybody after Theresa and all," Callum said. "Hell, ye're only the second bloke I've ever seriously gone out with, not counting groups of friends, things like that."

"Certainly there've been other gents that have caught your fancy?"

"Well, aside from ye, Bri, and Sean Connery, me scope of experience has been somewhat limited. I mean, aye, I've noticed other blokes over the years but I was rather quick to dismiss or ignore the attraction." He paused as he remembered something. "Once, when I had just married Theresa, I spotted this younger bloke at...Sainsbury, was it? Well, wherever it was, it didn't take long for him to notice me noticing him."

"Of course, I never said anything to him. It wasn't the time or the place and besides, I was married. That automatically meant I didn't with other blokes. But I still wanted to approach him and at least tell him he had great eyes. But I didn't. I couldn't."

Simon leaned over and kissed Callum on the neck. "Like that?"

Callum inhaled through his clenched teeth. "Aye."

Simon held the restaurant door open for him. "I've always looked around, enjoying the scenery. Maybe not so much when I was seeing Harvey and Avi, but I mean I always did when I was married to Chelle. I'd been convinced my schoolboy crushes and Harvey were simply phases, but..."

"Almost all the books I could find at school either spelled it out as a debilitating illness or a phase that would pass," Callum said after they'd been seated. "I believed it. Took me a long time before I finally found sources that weren't written by clergy. The joys of private boarding school education."

"You were incarcerated, too?"

"Our Lady of the Blessed Bleeding Internal Organs, Father Thomas Purseman, warden."

"My parents weren't particularly religious so I'll never figure out why I was sent to private school. It might have been the school was a good forty-five minutes away and all the good telly was over by the time my sister and I got home."

"Me dad is, to a point. It's church on Sunday and other days of obligation but as soon as me brother and I were out of school, he let us decide if we wanted to continue going. I went until I started university and Larry used his newfound freedom to sleep in."

"You'd never guess my music career began at school. Sister Madrigal would come in twice a week to teach us the songs for the big Friday church service the entire school would attend. Unfortunately, she had the bright idea that everybody could sing soprano, her range. Imagine if you will, all the boys between the ages of eleven and fifteen, their voices in various states of change, all being forced to sing *Rule Britannia* soprano."

"Ye poor bastard."

"I haven't recreated that falsetto since. Damn shame, now that I could actually use it."

"So yer school was mixed?"

"Separate floors for everything. The boys went up to the first floor while the girls stayed down on the ground."

"Probably figured the boys needed to be as close to heaven as possible."

"My older sister told me the girls weren't allowed to climb stairs so as not to permanently injure their privates."

"Ye know, that wouldn't surprise me. The girls from Gloria Excelsis Deo's Scholastic Institution for Proper Little Ladies always seemed to be as prim and starched as their uniforms."

"So you were actually allowed around girls?"

"We had weekly dances with the students from Gloria Excelsis Deo. The priest from Our Lady tried to treat it as a social activity, but the mandatory participation certainly didn't make it feel very social."

"I never really understood why we were separated by our genders. I mean, all the talk we got about the beauty of marriage and love and all that piss."

"Of course, if ye're already convinced girls aren't fer ye, it shouldn't make a difference if they're in the same room or locked up in a cupboard in the cellar."

"Oh, Lord. Bishop Harlan would gather the thirteen-year-olds for his annual 'now that you're becoming a man' speech, the closest to any sort of sex education I got at school. My turn, it took bloody forever, but it was long enough to get me out of French, geometry, and chemistry, so what did I care? Anyway, it mostly consisted of church-sanctioned films on the evils of puberty, but there was one about men who are That Way and how I could avoid becoming That Way. After that, Bishop Harlan told us boys exhibiting Those Tendencies would be sent down to the ground floor with 'the rest of the girls'. Direct quote."

"That's ridiculous."

"Innit? You'll never believe how many boys faked it in the hopes of being banished to the ground floor." As they spoke, Simon concentrated on Callum's eyes, barely able to wait to hold his hand again to feel the softness of his skin.

\* \* \* \*

As dinner progressed, Callum realized all his earlier fears and worries about his date with Simon were pointless. Simon was an intelligent, funny, attractive man who seemed interested in getting to know him. He relaxed, less afraid he would say or do anything that would somehow jeopardize his night out. (He thought the earlier kiss might have put a damper on things, but Simon seemed pleasantly surprised by it.)

After dinner, they left the restaurant hand in hand. Callum didn't have to think about it; it simply happened. At the movies, Callum slowly slid his arm across Simon's

shoulders. Simon moved a little closer to put his head on Callum's shoulder. Callum leaned his head on Simon's and closed his eyes, all interest in the film gone. The silence on the drive back to Callum's house was much more comfortable than earlier. Simon parked in front of the house then turned off the engine. "I had a really nice time tonight. Thank you for coming."

"Thanks fer asking. I enjoyed meself, as well." Slowly, they moved closer for a kiss, their lips lingering as Simon reached up and stroked his cheek. "Would ye like to come in for a nightcap?"

Simon checked his watch. "Yeah, that'd be nice. It's still rather early."

They got out of the van and walked to the front door, hand in hand. Inside, after Callum had locked the front door, Simon moved closer. "You have got the most beautiful brown eyes I have ever seen."

Callum blushed. "Thanks. I can't get over yers, either."

They kissed again, their mouths slow to open to each other. It was an intense kiss, a burn that Callum hadn't experienced with Brian.

*Bri? Bri? Who is this Bri person?*

As the passion of the kiss increased, their breathing became heavier. Simon slid his hands down Callum's back to cup his ass. Callum inhaled sharply as he pulled Simon closer.

When Simon broke the kiss, his eyes and smile shone. "Hi, there!"

Callum chuckled. "Hi, there, yerself."

Simon put his elbow on the door and stroked Callum's cheek with the back of his hand. "So, how about that nightcap?"

"Sure." Callum leaned against the door. "What would ye like? I've got some white wine or I could put the kettle on. I think I might even have a can or two of cider."

"The wine sounds good."

Callum's head spun as he stepped around Simon and walked to the kitchen. *Are kisses supposed to overload me like that? Bri was right; he isn't the standard to measure*

*everybody else.* He opened the cabinet where he kept his wines and cider, then looked back out at Simon. "Have a seat. I'll be out in a moment."

"Thanks. You've got a really nice house. Just the right size for one person."

"It was just me and me wife before the divorce. Seems a lot bigger now that I'm alone." Callum removed a corkscrew from a drawer. "I've been taking it rather well, considering."

"That's good. It can be pretty devastating."

"Ye'd think ours was the first, the way the families whisper about it in the drawing room. We were pretty open with each other near the end, lessening the animosity that had built." Callum pulled the cork from the wine bottle and poured two glasses. He took them back into the living room and handed one to Simon, then sat next to him on the couch at a "safe" distance, close enough to be friendly, yet far enough away to escape if he needed to.

"Cheers," Simon said before he had a drink. "How did she handle it when you told her you're gay?"

"I...din't. I haven't been able to be honest with most others about it."

"That's too bad."

"So, here I am now. Out on me own again, trying to figure out which end is up. I've got a great friend in Bri. He's been propping me up and willing to buy me a pint through this whole ordeal."

Simon's eyes lit up as he leaned closer. "Just the one?"

"Much more, I can assure ye."

"That's good. Avi and I have held each other up on numerous occasions. Almost too many to count, which is how we wound up sharing a house. Our last exes left us for each other."

"My God! That must have been humiliating."

"The night we were abandoned, we held each other and cried for about two hours. After that, we suddenly started laughing. The whole thing was just so absurd. Besides, it wasn't the first time one of us was crying on the other over some bounder."

Callum took Simon's hand. "Thanks again for tonight. I've really enjoyed meself."

"Me, too." Simon squeezed Callum's hand in return. "I've just been so busy with two jobs, it's been rather difficult to find the time to meet anybody, much less anybody as smart and handsome as you."

"Now ye're making me blush." Callum ducked his head.

"But you are. Compared to most of the drips I meet out on the music club circuit. Most of the time, the conversation starts and stops with music, usually with them asking if Difficult Position are looking for another guitar player or drummer."

"Well, I'm sure ye understand if I tell ye I hardly know what's serious and what's play right now."

"I know how difficult it is. But rest assured, I'm very serious. Granted, we have another date tomorrow night, but I think I'd really like to see you more often." He rubbed the back of Callum's hand with his thumb. "I've had fun tonight and I think it's going to take more than two dates to get to know you better."

"Me, too, Simon."

Callum's heart screamed in terror. He felt a deeper connection, one he didn't have with Brian, something different. Yes, he had talked about the same subjects he'd covered with Brian, but it felt more special with Simon.

"Lord, I could drown in there. There's so much going on in you. I haven't felt this relaxed and enjoyed myself with another bloke in so long." Simon leaned closer for a small kiss and trailed his fingertip along Callum's cheek. "Thank you once more for a wonderful evening, Callum. Let me know when I can see you again, yeah?"

"I'll work something out."

"Now, I hope you don't think I'm churlish for not spending the night, as much as I'd like to."

"No, that's fine. I hadn't even considered it."

*Much.*

"Honestly, it's the old work, I have to get up early tomorrow excuse, that sort of thing."



"Quite all right."

Simon kissed the back of Callum's hand as they stood and held it to his lips for a second longer than necessary. "Your skin is so soft," he whispered then kissed Callum's palm

Callum was surprised by the affection but soon melted into it. He closed his eyes and took in the moment while he rubbed Simon's back and listened to him breathe.

*Wasn't this how it was supposed to be with Theresa? I don't remember feeling anything like this during the entire time we were together.*

"I'll see you tomorrow night, then." He rested his forehead against Callum's. "My place, about seven?"

"I'm looking forward to it."

Simon took his jacket from the hook then kissed Callum once again. "Take care, Callum."

"Good night, Simon." Callum unlocked the front door and held it open. He watched Simon walk to the van and closed the door once he'd driven away. He leaned his back against it and laughed. "Christ, I am such a girl."

## Chapter Thirteen

"Right," Simon said to himself as he checked dinner. The chicken had been put in the oven to keep it warm, the peas were almost finished steaming, and the garlic mashed potatoes waited for the gravy. He quickly removed the lid on the potatoes and dipped a spoon in to taste them one last time.

"Perfect," he said with a smile. "Perfect, perfect, perfect."

He dropped the spoon into the sink as he walked out to the living room, where he found Avi slumped in the easy chair as he absentmindedly flipped through the television channels. "Not perfect."

Avi looked up at Simon. "Hello?"

"Come on." Simon took the remote from Avi's hand and switched off the television. "Off you go. Spit spot."

"Oh, that's right. It's your special dinner night."

"Yes, and Callum will be here at any time." Simon fluffed the cushion Avi had flattened when he'd sat on it.

"Lord knows, wouldn't want me bringing down the tone of the place."

"Avi..."

"Relax. I'm more than happy to vacate the premises. Besides, it gives me an excuse to go out and do..." He made a small, vague wave with his hand. "Something. Actually, I should go down to the abbey tonight. No need to jeopardize my entire schedule this term."

Simon made a final check of the dining table. "Seminarians don't need perfectly spotless records, do they?"

"The way Reverend Williams looks down his nose every time I show for my volunteer shift, you'd think so." Avi folded his arms. "Sorry. Don't mean to get so heavy when I'm supposed to be on my way out the door."

"You're passing your classes this term, right?"

"I'm fine except for psychology. Then, only just."

"Tell you what. I'll make sure to save you a plate and we can have a chinwag when you get home, yeah?"

"That sounds great. What are we having?"

"Roast chicken, garlic mashed potatoes, gravy and peas."

Avi's face fell a little. "Oh, Simon. First time you're cooking for the boy and all you can come up with is Sunday dinner?"

Well, it *is* Sunday."

"Still, not very impressive, is it? It's rather safe. Your first time making dinner and you should have gone for something memorable."

"Excuse me, Delia."

"Tell me. What did you cook the first time you had me around for dinner?"

"Roast beef. Jacket potatoes with parmesan and mozzarella cheeses. Carrots, which I glazed myself," he said, each word clipped short. He cocked an eyebrow and added, "A Sunday dinner on a Friday evening. The defense rests, m'lud."

Avi paused. "Bloody hell. Game, set, match."

"Mmm," Simon muttered and nodded his head.

"Maybe that's why we couldn't remain a couple. You were right more often than I." Just as Avi spoke, the doorbell rang. "That'll be my cue. I'll let him in." He opened the door and found Callum had been soaked by the rain that poured down outside. "Bloody hell."

"I swear, it was clear as a bell when I left home," Callum said as he stepped inside and shook the water from his shirt. "Just as I stepped out of the station, it started pissing down."

"Get inside. I'll grab a towel, poor dear." Avi shut the door and dashed upstairs.

Simon stepped out into the hall. "Hi, there."

"Hallo. And so cometh the rain."

Avi came back downstairs and handed Callum a towel. "Here you go. How are you otherwise?"

Callum began to dry his hair. "Just fine, thanks."

"I'm on my way out, so have a good evening," Avi said as he kissed Simon on the cheek.

"That's my favorite towel," Simon whispered.

"Yes. It is." Avi gave a wag of his eyebrows as he turned and walked to the front door. "Don't wait up."

He took a leather jacket from a peg on the wall and removed an umbrella from a stand by the door, then gave Callum and Simon a wave before he left and closed the door behind him.

"Where's he off to on a night like tonight?" Callum asked.

"He's going down to the abbey. It's his volunteer night for university credit."

Callum handed the towel to Simon, who briefly panicked. Finally alone with Callum, he was uncertain what to do next. The last time he'd had anybody over was...him...that one bloke...whom he'd met...somewhere some time ago. Even then, it was a useless one-nighter that hadn't warranted saving the guy's cell phone number.

"So," Simon said as he draped the towel over the banister and put his hands in his pockets. "How are you?"

"Fine, otherwise." Callum held out the bottle. "I brought some wine. I wasn't sure what ye'd be making, so I figured it would be fine fer afters."

Simon took the bottle. "Hi, there. Thanks again for coming," he whispered before he leaned over and kissed Callum's cheek.

"I appreciate it."

Simon's heart melted when he saw Callum had blushed. "My pleasure. Go on into the front room and I'll put this in the kitchen."

As Simon slowly walked to the kitchen, he couldn't look away from Callum's brown eyes. He leaned against the doorway, and there was a lengthy pause as they continued to stare at each other. The mood was finally broken when both of them started to laugh.

"I'll see ye in a moment." Callum still smiled as he turned and walked into the front room.

"Jesus," Simon muttered to himself. He went into the kitchen and set the wine on the counter, then took a saucepan out of a cupboard and put it on the stove to make the gravy.

*That was rather silly. I hope we're able to talk during dinner.*

Later, Simon went into the front room. "Dinner's ready."

Callum looked up from the copy of *Hello Magazine* he'd been flipping through. "Great. Ye've quite the collection." He pointed at the stack that leaned dangerously near the edge of the table.

"Bloody hell. I asked him to clear that off earlier."

Callum stood. "Aye, I wouldn't exactly be proud to admit I read it, either."

"No, I just wanted the room tidied before you'd arrived," Simon replied, irritated.

"It's fine, otherwise."

Simon picked up the offending stack of magazines. "Just want to make a decent impression and what happens? It's a special night, so is it too much to ask for just a little cooperation?"

He dropped the magazines into a paper bag by the door then turned around to find Callum standing in the hall, and immediately turned red over his little domestic fit.

"Are ye okay?" Callum asked.

"Yeah. Sure. Of course." Simon fanned himself with his hand. "Is it warm in here, or is it just me?"

Callum stepped out into the hall. "Are ye sure?"

"Of course. Sure. Yeah." Simon put his hands in his pockets. "No. As you can obviously tell."

"Why?"

"I want tonight to be special. Something for you to remember. I mean, for myself, as well. Not just you. For us, actually."

"No. I understand."

Simon crossed his arms. "Sorry for acting like a fool."

"I'm still here, aren't I?" Callum moved closer and hugged Simon.

"Sorry." Simon rested his head on Callum's shoulder. "It's just a rather long time since I've had anybody over with any sort of romantic intentions."

The words already out of his mouth, Simon winced in horror. *You ninny! No sense scaring off the lad when he's only just gotten here.*

\* \* \* \*

Simon uncorked the wine and removed a plate of cheese, bread, and fruit covered in cling wrap from the refrigerator.

"Of course, there was almost no argument which bedroom was mine when Avi and I moved in," Simon said as he put the plate on the table and poured some wine for Callum. "The tree out front blocks almost all of the sun, so my room is one of the coolest in the house. Avi's got the room at this side of the house, so I guess he doesn't mind sleeping in a blast furnace."

Callum pulled a grape from a bunch on the plate and offered it to Simon. His lips lingered on Callum's fingers as he took the grape, a quiet purr sounding from the back of his throat. Callum traced the outline of Simon's lips with his fingertip. Simon picked up a section of pear and offered it to Callum. Callum bit into it, sending a few drops of juice down Simon's hand. "Sorry," he said with a small laugh. "I'll try to keep it as neat as possible."

"That's quite all right." Simon licked up the drops that slid down his wrist.

"I don't want to mess up yer table linen." Callum popped a grape into his mouth and took a bite of bread covered with soft cheese.

"Trust me. This tablecloth has seen worse messes."

Callum stopped as an unpleasant surprise filled his mouth. "Bloody hell," he said, trying not to swallow.

"What's wrong?"

"Goat cheese. Why did it have to be goat cheese?"

Simon handed Callum his napkin. "Sorry. I wasn't aware of any aversion to it."

"It's okay." Callum spat the offending bite into the napkin. "Ye couldn't have known."

"There's gouda on the plate, if you prefer."

"Thanks." Callum nodded then drank some more wine. "Otherwise, it's been a lovely evening, Simon. I'm glad ye asked me around." He found a piece of the gouda and had a nibble.

"My pleasure."

"I was sort of hoping I could have ye over at me house weekend after next."

"I'd love to," Simon sounded a little disappointed, "but Difficult Position are playing in Essex then."

"Oh."

"But I'm available this upcoming Saturday, if you'd like."

"Sure. That would work. We could make a day of it."

"Sounds wonderful." Simon reached across the table and stroked the back of Callum's hand. "I promise to be a bit more discrete the next time I try to poison you."

"At least ye waited until the second date before ye tried anything."

"How quickly I try to murder somebody is a good gauge on how much I like them."

Callum blushed and put his free hand over his face. "Oh, dear."

"God, Callum. I didn't mean to..."

"I'm fine." Callum moved his hand away. "Really."

Simon put his hand over Callum's then lifted it to his lips. Just as he kissed the back of Callum's hand, the front door opened.

"Back early. Reverend Williams let some of us go before the end of the shift, but is giving us full credit for the evening." Avi walked into the dining room. "Hello. Have a nice time?"

Simon glanced up at Avi then back into Callum's eyes. "Quite."

"I'm not..."

"No, not much. We were just finishing."

"Aye," Callum added. "I think I need to get down to the station, anyway."

"Can I walk you down?" Simon quietly asked, in the hope he could hang on to the feeling for just a few more minutes.

"Certainly." Callum stood, then left the dining room.

Simon kissed Avi's cheek. "Thanks again."

"You're welcome." Avi kissed Simon, who then followed Callum.

Simon was secretly pleased to see it raining when they left the house. That only meant one thing: they had to share an umbrella for the walk to the Tube station. Simon opened the umbrella and held it over their heads, then slid his arm across Callum's shoulders. Callum put his arm around Simon's waist before they exchanged nervous smiles and left for the station. They were quiet as they walked and Simon wished they were actually in a park and Callum didn't have to go home.

*This weekend. Plenty of time this weekend for the romantic sop.*



## Chapter Fourteen

It was still rather early in the day but time had slowed down and the work on Callum's desk continued to reproduce. He wondered how dependent he'd become on caffeine; he certainly didn't drink as much coffee or Coke as Brian, who never seemed to show any ill effects from over-indulgence. As he contemplated an impromptu trip to the canteen, the phone rang. "Callum MacInnes, may I help ye?"

"Hello, Callum. I hope you don't me calling you at work," Simon said in his quiet voice.

Callum sat up a little. "No, not at all."

"I've got a bit of good news. I'm a free man this weekend."

"Really? Sounds great."

"Difficult Position aren't playing anywhere this weekend and I was able to convince the other manager at HMV to come in for me, so I was wondering if you'd be available, as well."

Callum thought for a moment; he hadn't firmed anything up with Brian. "Aye. I'm open."

"Great. I'll pick you up Friday evening and we'll take it from there, yeah?"

"Sure."

"Or is there anything in particular you wanted to do?"

"Not sure, really. Maybe a pint then dinner after?"

"Yeah, that'll be fine. Nothing too formal, okay? Give you a chance to get out of your usual suit and tie."

Callum was thankful Simon wasn't able to see him blush over such an innocent remark. "Aye. That sounds great."

"See you Friday about seven, then."

"Take care, Simon."

"Bye, now."

Callum tapped his fingers on his phone. Even though it was nice to hear from Simon again, he knew the anticipation of their next weekend together would make time slow down even more. He turned back to his work, positive the stack of files had grown again since he'd answered the phone.

Callum's luck suffered a minor setback after he'd incorrectly guessed the headlines as Royalty, but rebounded when he and Brian left for lunch. "Got a call from Mum and Dad earlier," Brian said as he removed his jacket. "They'd like to see me this weekend, so I hope you understand if we don't get together."

"Aye. Simon was hoping I could see him this weekend, anyway. It's one of the rare times he has off from both jobs."

Brian took Callum's hand. "How is everything between you two?"

"It's still rather early, but I haven't said or done anything to chase him off." Callum gave Brian's hand a small squeeze. "Yet."

"Oh, come on. You make it sound as if you're cursed."

"Considering me luck with relationships..."

"You've told me you want to see if Simon's at least going to be a friend, right?"

"Aye. Sorry fer playing tragic victim again."

"That's all right." Brian released Callum's hand and slipped his arm across his shoulders. "You'll feel better in time."

"I think I have been, lately. There are days, though, where it crushes down on me."

"Yeah. It will."

"Remember when ye were thirteen and couldn't wait until ye got to be this age?"

"Unfortunately. Christ, when I was that age, I was the worst know-it-all."

"Yeah, but how much do ye really know now?"

Brian snorted in laughter. "Almost as much as I did then."

"Aye, I'm scared fer meself, too."

After work on Friday, Callum took another shower once he'd gotten home and fussed over the smallest possible detail. How "not formal" was "not formal"? How casual could he get? Simple blue jeans and a t-shirt? That sounded fine. It was just a drink and dinner, a relaxed Friday evening out but he felt like a total wreck. Callum dropped his towel on the bedroom floor and rummaged through the clean laundry he'd unceremoniously dumped on the corner chair. He found a pair of green underwear and slipped it on, then pulled out a t-shirt in a similar shade.

After Callum had put the shirt on, he caught a glimpse of himself in the full-length mirror on the back of the bedroom door and stopped. "My God," he said out loud. "Is this what I look like now?"

He lifted his t-shirt and turned around to see at how the underwear had shaped him. He smoothed the shirt down and faced the mirror again. "Is this what Bri and Simon see? I'm...almost rather attractive."

He leaned closer to the mirror and inspected his face. "God, what's Simon going to say when he notices the scar on me nose?" He ran his fingers through his damp hair to fluff it out a bit and scratched his chin, under his beard. "What do Bri and Simon see?"

Callum stepped back from the mirror then removed his shirt and underwear. After he studied himself, front and back, once again, he folded his arms across his chest.

"I don't see it," he said and shook his head. He could understand why they thought his face attractive, but the rest left him puzzled. "Maybe me arse." He turned around and looked at it once more.

Callum put his underwear on again and moved closer to the mirror to inspect his face. If Brian had never noticed the scar from an ill-fated attempt to pierce his nose with a safety pin, who's to say Simon ever would? Or would Simon say anything about it? Of course, both Brian and Simon always mentioned Callum's eyes and smile as the things

that attracted them the most. Callum stepped away from the mirror and ran his hands around his midsection. "Maybe they're both being nice and not saying anything about it because they're afraid they'd insult me," he said and flexed both arms. Still a fair amount of muscle. Plenty to build up and show off, if needed.

But for whom?

Callum put on his t-shirt and inspected himself a final time. He wondered if he'd ever figure out what "it" was or if he even had "it", or if "it" was some invisible mark he couldn't see but others could. Brian had. Simon probably had. Theresa must have. That bloke with the beautiful, sexy lips at Sainsbury might have. Was it even possible for Timothy McHenry to have seen "it" when he was fourteen years old? Frustrated, Callum rubbed his hands over his face, then opened the bedroom door to prevent further distraction. He then put on his jeans, socks and trainers, then went downstairs to wait for Simon.

Callum had taken more time than he'd realized to inspect himself because he'd barely had any time to sit down and turn on the television when the bell rang. He turned the television off and tossed the remote onto the couch, then went to the door. Simon was out on the front step, his hands almost shyly behind his back. "Hallo."

"Hi."

"Come on in." Callum held the door open, surprised to see Simon wearing a black t-shirt, jeans, boots and a blue denim jacket, looking every inch the rock and roll star. As often as Brian had worn a similar type of outfit on several occasions, Callum wondered if it was standard uniform for men dating each other.

Simon stepped into the doorway and put his arms over Callum's shoulders. "Hello."

"Hi. Nice to see ye again." Callum kissed him then rested his forehead against Simon's.

"Same here." Simon pulled back and took both of Callum's hands in his. "I know of a nice little spot that has it all within reach. Cheap booze followed by cheap take-away. Nothing too fancy tonight, yeah?"

Callum took his denim jacket off the hook by the front door as Simon led him out. "Fine by me. The less rushing about, the better. It's just been one deadline after another all week."

"It'll be a tad loud, but what pub isn't on a Friday night?"

As they walked to Simon's van, Callum spotted Mrs. Wattle coming down the walk. She was on her way to the church up the road when she noticed Simon and Callum walking arm in arm. She stopped to glare at them as she sniffed her disapproval.

"Evening, Mrs. Wattle," Callum said with a friendly wave. Mrs. Wattle made a sweeping motion with her hand to indicate they were to hurry along so they wouldn't vex her further with their presence. After they were locked safely in the van, Mrs. Wattle picked up her pace a bit continued on her way.

"Oh, dear," Callum said as he watched her through the front windscreen. "Prepare for a few extra prayers to be said for us this weekend."

"Nice somebody's looking out for us, yeah?" Simon started the van and drove away.

The Wellington was already packed when Simon and Callum arrived, the crowd a bit more animated than what Callum had seen at the Feather and Larch. A few people waved at Simon as he and Callum entered and made their way to the bar. One rather boisterous patron approached them while they waited for their drinks. "Simon, dear," he said, rather soused, and put his arms around Simon's neck in an awkward hug. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Oh!" Simon was pulled into a kiss and fought to keep it on his cheek. "Stu. Hi. Glad to see you?"

Callum's discomfort almost matched his own.

"Come on, Simon. Surely you can be a bit more friendly." Stu pouted then tried to kiss Simon again.

Simon's smile faded as he slipped from Stu's grip. "Stu, I am here with somebody."

Stu rolled his eyes. "That's your excuse every time I see you."

"But this time it's true."

Callum leaned over Simon and held out his hand. "Callum MacInnes."

"So it's daddy bears this week." Stu studied him, barely shaking Callum's hand.

"As opposed to bottled blonds?" Callum arched his eyebrow and wondered what the hell Stu meant by "daddy bear".

"How polite. Does it know any other tricks?"

"Stu, get the fuck out while you still have kneecaps, yeah?" Simon pushed him away.

Callum handed Simon his bitter as Stu left them. "Total cheek on that one. Who the hell was that?"

"A bad mistake from long ago." Simon took Callum's hand and led him away from the bar. They found a corner table and sat down. "The less said, the better. So can I show a bloke a good time or not?"

"Just as long as he doesn't come back."

Simon scratched Callum's beard. "He won't. He's allergic to beards."

Callum leaned into his touch. "So why'd he come after ye?"

"I was much more clean-cut a few million years ago. Stu's convinced he can talk me into shaving and cutting my hair again." .

"Whatever ye do, don't."

"Oh, never. I'm quite vain and will be the first to tell you how good it looks on me."

"It's not vanity on me part so much as it's sloth. I just can't be arsed to shave." Callum shook his head. "It soon landed on Theresa's list of things to complain about."

"Chelle wasn't too happy about me growing my hair out, but I'd already served her with the divorce papers when she finally said something, almost as an afterthought."

"Ye're asking me fer a divorce? Well, I hate yer hair."

"Exactly! I guess it was the shock I'd beaten her to the solicitor." Simon ran his fingertip slowly down the bridge of Callum's nose but stopped about halfway. "Are you all right there?"

"Aye. I'm fine. Oh. That." He rubbed the side of his nose. "A misguided attempt to prove me punk status during me misspent youth."

"After seeing how much blood my cousin drew, I retreated to the safety of the white shirts and skinny ties favored by the new wave crowd." He shook his head with a shudder. "I know I look all tough guy and such but I'm really a little girl when it comes to blood, fake or real."

"So no gory movies fer you, I take it."

"No, thanks." Simon shook his head. "I prefer my horror psychological or off camera."

"I'll see what I have in me collection, then."

"Hello again, boys. Why, thanks, I shall join you." Stu sat down before either could respond and moved his chair closer to Simon.

"Jesus Christ, Stu!" Simon pulled away as best he could. "Callum's right next to me, remember?"

Stu glanced over at Callum with a sneer. "Oh. Hello."

Callum managed a weak smile and waved. "Toodle pip."

Simon glared at Stu. "Good *night*."

"Okay. Fine. Good night, then." With a dramatic sigh, Stu rubbed himself against Simon as he stood and flounced back to the bar.

"It's just not worth it," Simon said when he was gone. "Should we just pop out for dinner?"

"Won't he follow us out?"

"I think he has a room above the Wellington. Nobody's really seen him outside the confines of the pub lately."

"Aye, let's go, then. I really don't feel like wondering when he's going to strike next."

"Shame there's no Italian place across the road. A spot of garlic would work wonders about now."

The sun had just gone down when Callum and Simon walked out of the restaurant, arm in arm. "So, would you be comfortable coming back to my place for the proverbial

nightcap?" He kissed Callum on the tip of his nose. "Even if it's just to hold you all night."

"I think I can be convinced."

"Fantastic." Simon put his forehead to Callum's with a wide grin. They kissed before they took each other's hand and walked to Simon's van. But when they parked in front of Simon's house, there was a light in the front room.

"Avi's still in, looks like." Simon took Callum's hand as they went up the walk to the front door. As he opened the door, Simon noticed Callum's discomfort and the way he regarded the light in the front room.

*Poor lad. Hope he's not going to flee soon.*

Simon closed the door and switched off the front hall light. "Hello! We're back."

Avi, dressed in a pale blue polo shirt, socks, and grey boxer briefs, appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Evening, gents. Have a nice time?"

"I thought so," Simon said. "Callum?"

Callum nodded. "Aye, thanks."

"Care for a cup?" Avi held up a teapot. "Just made it. I've got a long night of psychology work ahead."

"Cheers, thanks," Simon replied. "Callum?"

"Aye, that'd be nice."

"We can just take it upstairs, yeah?" Simon said as they walked into the kitchen. Simon handed him a mug from the drain board, then Avi poured for him and Simon.

"Milk, sugar, or lemon?" Avi asked.

Callum smiled shyly. "No, thanks. Cheers."

"Anytime."

"See you later, then." Simon took a sip from his mug as he and Callum left the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*



Callum was surprised how much light Simon's eyes caught from the dim bedroom lamp. Every time Simon smiled, they brightened and captivated him. Every time Callum noticed Simon looking at him, he glanced away and took a sip from his mug.

Callum contemplated his options. He had agreed with Simon and wanted to be held by him, but didn't know how to approach it. Would he ruin it if he made the first move? Was it up to Simon? It *was* Simon's bedroom, after all.

Simon set his mug on the nightstand and stood up. "Come here." Relieved, Callum stood then put his mug next to Simon's. They hugged and Callum rested his head on Simon's shoulder. "This is nice."

"Isn't it?" Simon kissed Callum's neck. "I could do this all night."

"Aye," Callum whispered. It felt nice when Brian held him, but there were times where he wondered if Brian was afraid Callum would leave and never return, so he clung for dear life. With Simon, Callum felt warm and comforted.

Simon kissed Callum's neck again then released him. "Let's get a bit more comfortable, then."

Simon sat on the bed and unlaced one of his boots. Uneasy, Callum undressed, aware he was in a bedroom that wasn't his or Brian's. He decided to play it safe and kept his clothes nearby. The Tube stop was just a short run up the road, if need be. Simon had unlaced and removed his boot when he looked up at Callum, who'd removed his shirt and had unzipped his jeans to reveal everything neatly packaged in green underpants. "Nice pants."

"Thanks. I got them..." He stopped, remembering they were the first pair he'd bought on Brian's insistence. "On sale."

Simon leaned back and patted the empty space behind him. "Leave them and your socks on. Makes you look hotter than hell."

"Thanks." Callum answered, uncertain of what to do with his hands. He awkwardly crossed his arms and walked around to the other side of the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress; Simon was still leaned back and prevented him from getting under the blankets.

"Have you ever played rugby?" Simon reached over and rubbed Callum's thigh.

"The closest I ever got was running beer fer me brother and his mates during matches on telly."

Simon kissed Callum's knee before he sat up and unlaced his other boot. "You've got a great shape to you."

Callum hesitated and wondered what would be an appropriate reaction before he said a quiet "Thanks" as red crept over his face and ears.

Simon slid off his boot then stood and removed his shirt. Callum thought he looked better without it, his chest and stomach covered with thick red hair and his shoulders dusted with a sea of freckles. He couldn't quite make out the detail, but Simon had some sort of tattoo on his right bicep.

Simon dropped his jeans onto the floor then, wearing just his socks and a purple silk thong, hopped into bed next to Callum and landed with a bounce. "Are you okay?"

"Aye, I'll be fine. The cider's doing a number on me head." Callum got a better look at the tattoo, a light grey dragon with blue eyes and white highlights along the scales. He traced its outline with his fingertip. "Nice work."

Simon flexed his bicep. "Thanks." He reached over to the lamp on the nightstand and switched it off, then moved closer to Callum and stroked his arm. "You are so warm. Still don't want to let you go."

"No, Simon. Ye don't have to just yet."

Simon rubbed Callum's stomach in a slow circle. "You, sir, are one of the more handsome men I've met. Ever."

"Ever."

Not "in a long while". Not "since the last one". Not "besides myself".

"*Ever*."

Callum had started to melt into Simon's touch but the compliment caused his stomach to tighten a little. It sounded different coming from Simon than it had from Brian. Then again, Brian hadn't given Callum such high marks. Callum hoped the pause wasn't as long as it felt so he finally said, "Once again, thank ye."

"You are. It all starts with those beautiful eyes," he laid down next to Callum and kissed his forehead, "and that wonderful rugger bugger build, all the way to your lovely smile, to your sense of humor and intelligence. Just want to hold you some more."

"Please do." Callum stroked Simon's arm as Simon kissed his shoulder, then up his neck to Callum's lips. Callum turned onto his side as they kissed and hesitated before he put his hand on Simon's lower back.

"God, your hands are so beautiful." He put his forehead against Callum's. "This. Just...this."

"Just what?"

"Just what we're doing. I said I'd be happy just holding you all night. We don't have to do anything else. That is, unless you'd prefer it."

"No, this is fine."

Even in the dim light, Simon's smile was fantastic. He moved closer to Callum and put his arms around him. Callum pulled the blankets up then put his head on Simon's chest and listened to his heart race. Warmed by the glow he felt between them, he grew more tired and finally yawned. "Good Laird, I'm starting to drift."

"Same here."

"Thanks again fer a wonderful evening, Simon."

"My pleasure, Callum." Simon's breathing became deeper as he fell asleep.

Callum fell asleep moments later.

*It's the dragon. It's him.*

## Chapter Fifteen

Brian lay in bed and listened to the rain as it fell outside the open window. Once he and Callum had returned from the cinema, they'd undressed and got into bed, not interested in anything beyond that. He tried to dismiss it as lethargy brought on by the heat earlier in the day but something just didn't feel right, as if one of them had steeled himself for impending disaster, an Important Conversation or an Important Conversation that would lead to impending disaster.

"I was thinking about the possibility of heading out to that excellent carvery tomorrow night. That is, unless you've other plans," he said.

Callum kept his eyes closed. "Actually, I have, Bri. Simon's off to Essex Sunday afternoon so he asked if I could see him tomorrow."

"That's fine." Brian yawned and midway through, his eyes flew open.

*Where'd that come from? Oh. That's right. I'm the cool one who doesn't have any qualms with Callum dating other guys.*

Callum turned onto his side and faced Brian. "So I guess that I'll have to be leaving soon."

"Don't be in such a hurry." Brian stroked Callum's arm. "All this dashing about twixt two suitors is bound to have ill effects on your social standing."

"Aye, Miss Rodgers is certain to look askance upon me."

"Oh, well, then your life is all but over. Might as well hang up your jockstrap and call it a day." Brian put his arms around Callum. "Don't go."

"Ye know I would stay if I could, Bri." Callum kissed Brian's shoulder. "Ye'll have me all to yerself fer the next two weeks."

Brian hugged Callum then kissed the top of his head. "Well, in that case, there's an open invitation for you to come with me to the pride festival."

"Bri, I'm not sure I'm ready fer something like that. I don't think I've really done anything worth celebrating."

"Okay. I just figured there's a lot of resources there that could help you."

"Can I think about it and let ye know?"

"Sure. I really didn't mean...no pressure, okay?"

"It's okay, Bri."

"Shall I see you to the station, then?"

"That'd be fine."

As they stood and got dressed, Brian felt like another bomb was about to drop on them. Callum seemed relieved with his positive response but the fear played at the back of Brian's mind as he locked the apartment door behind them and they walked down to the train station, hand in hand under an umbrella.

The station was eerily quiet when they arrived. "I guess the rain's enough to keep everybody away," Brian said as he closed the umbrella.

Callum checked his watch. "It's just last call, so give the punters an hour or so."

"Are you sure you have to go?"

"Aye, Bri. I promised Simon I'd see him."

"Even before you talked to me about it?"

Callum scoffed. "Hold on, Bri. Yellow card. I won't be seeing Simon at all fer the next two weeks."

Brian took a step back. "Well, we usually get together on the weekends."

"Why the sudden hostility? I mean, why can't I see Simon on the weekends or whenever it's convenient fer his schedule? He's two jobs so there's less spontaneity."

"Well..." Brian grasping for an answer. "I might have had something planned for tomorrow."

"But ye would have mentioned it."

"I did!"

"We din't have anything concrete when ye asked me to the carvery! Ye asked me if I'd already made plans and I told ye I had."

"But..." Brian trailed off.

"What? Ye were expecting them to automatically include ye?"

"Well..."

Callum folded his arms and shook his head. "Well, so much for the 'let's be honest with each other' routine. Look where it's gotten me. Whatever. I wasn't aware I couldn't rearrange me schedule without yer permission."

"You can."

"So why are ye getting so bent out of shape?"

"Me? *I'm* the one getting bent out of shape?" Brian asked, a little more loudly this time.

"Aye. Ye're the one who's acting like I can't negotiate. So what am I supposed to do? Not agree to see Simon unless I've consulted with ye first? Make sure it fits in with yer schedule?"

"I'm...not sure what to say."

Callum ignored Brian. "Or what am I supposed to do if ye happen to go off to Essex fer two weeks? Not see Simon at all?"

"Did I even suggest that?"

"Well, ye seemed a little surprised that I'd agreed to see Simon before I talked to ye."

"But what if I'd planned something for you and me?"

"I still would have politely begged off because..."

"Because you won't be seeing Simon for the next two weeks. Yes, yes, I know."

"Ye know what? This is getting ridiculous. I'm not sure what to say any longer. Ye may have a few more problems with me seeing Simon than we've realized, but ye're going to have to deal with it. Jesus Christ, this sounds like one of me arguments with

Theresa turned inside out." He glanced at the train schedule and then his watch. "Me train's here in ten minutes, so I'll see ye Monday."

"Can I...call you tomorrow?" Brian quietly asked.

Callum faced Brian again. "I'll see ye on Monday. Good night, Brian."

Before Brian could speak, Callum turned around and went through the turnstile to the train platform.

"Prick," Brian muttered to himself as he angrily wiped some tears from his eyes with his fingers. He then turned and walked from the station.

*Christ, what the fuck have I done?*

\* \* \* \*

It was easy to ignore the alarm's incessant nagging at first, but the longer it went, the more it irritated Simon. He tried to switch it off with the dormant telepathic abilities he knew he had but when that failed, he rolled over and hit the alarm button with his fingertips.

"Die, motherfucker," he muttered.

He turned over onto his back and took a deep breath as he put his arm over his eyes. It wasn't right. He had the day off and felt he shouldn't have to rise any earlier than eleven. But it was half past eight. He normally got up at that time, but only if he was going to work. Granted, he was meeting Callum, but nobody should get up at half past eight on a Saturday if they didn't have to go to work. Simon groaned, "I want my mummy."

Still somewhat damp from his shower, Simon all but flew into the kitchen where he found Avi had made some tea. "Praise the gods and thank you," he said as he took his mug from the counter.

Avi checked his watch. "Weren't you were supposed to be out of here about fifteen minutes ago?"

"I woke up in time for tea, a shower, and breakfast, but I fell asleep again. Don't know where my mind is at." He doctored his tea and took several cautious sips. "I've never ever been late for work, much less a date."

"Bullshit," Avi replied in a quiet, sing-song tone as he took the morning paper and left the kitchen.

Simon followed Avi. "Okay. Okay, there was the one time. I'll concede that."

Avi turned and looked at Simon over the edge of his mug. "Nope."

Simon groaned. "Oh, Jesus. I forgot. Exes keep score."

Avi raised an eyebrow. "And you don't?"

"On the major things, yes."

"But punctuality isn't one of them."

"Maybe as a petty misdemeanor. Major felonies include forgetting birthdays and stealing, but being late? Hardly." Simon scoffed it away with a wave of his hand before he had another a sip of tea.

"How's the irony? I'll bet it's delicious."

Simon glared at Avi one last time and handed him his mug. "Not sure what time I'll be in," he muttered before leaving.

"You're lucky you have a habit of crossing against the lights." The only response Avi received was the front door closing.

\* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, Brian turned over in his bed and stretched his arm onto the empty space next to him. It really shouldn't have surprised him to find it empty but it did.

*Callum went home last night. He's off to meet up with Simon today.*

He rubbed his eyes with his fingertips and sat up, wondering if there was any way he'd be able to make up for his performance the night before. It really wasn't fair of him, but he'd been single for most of the time he'd known Callum. Yet Callum had only just come out and poof! Two blokes at the same time! Brian stood and slowly trudged



toward the bathroom. He could only blame it on Callum's accent and eyes. He was just too damned cute for his own good.

Brian sipped his coffee as he stared out the kitchen window, delighted the sky was a brilliant, clear blue.

*An amazingly good mood. Different. Fascinating, Captain.*

Dressed in a light blue polo shirt and his walking shorts, he contemplated what to do with the day, what he did before he and Callum... Brian stopped.

"Terrific," he said to himself and turned away from the window.

He'd started to put his life in terms of "before Callum" and "after Callum". That's all he needed. He finished his coffee and set the mug in the sink.

"Well, there goes that good mood," he said to himself as he walked out to the front room. He put on his shoes then quickly left, sighing loudly as he locked the door behind him. He *definitely* didn't want to be around for the rest of the day.

\* \* \* \*

Callum arrived at the bus stop and checked his watch; about ten minutes before his bus arrived. As he waited, he looked at the ground. The usual pile of Flake and Whispa wrappers and empty Hula Hoop packets had vanished, along with the empty lager cans. Mrs. Wattle and her children's group from the church up the road had been by earlier on their weekly rubbish collection, apparently. Sure enough, he spotted them across the road. The children had spent another Saturday morning learning about community service and struggled to keep up with Mrs. Wattle on their way back to the church.

Once aboard the bus, Callum stared out the window and thought about the previous night's events. He could have just as easily lied to Brian and told him he was visiting his parents. He stepped off the bus and walked down the road to the Tube station.

*Of course, Bri's strop shouldn't have been so unexpected. I don't understand why he was being so unreasonable, though. He knows I'd eventually begin dating again. He massaged his temples as he stepped into the waiting area. Can't win fer losing.*

Callum continued to ponder Brian's reaction on the train ride to Golders Green. He owed it to Brian to let him know about the change in weekend plans. That "let's be honest with each other" pledge had begun to warp itself at the most inopportune moments. He stepped out into the waiting room and didn't see Simon, so he found an empty bench and sat down to wait. It would be easy to hop the next train back home, but it wasn't about Brian any longer. He wanted to spend more time with Simon and he'd found the perfect opportunity.

*Brian just needs to get over himself.* Callum folded his arms and stared at his feet.

\* \* \* \*

Simon arrived at the station and noticed something was bothering Callum. His arms were folded tightly across his chest while he stared intently at the floor, his forehead creased in thought. Simon sat on the bench across from him, but when this didn't interrupt Callum's meditation, he leaned forward to make direct eye contact with a small smile. "Hi."

"Simon. Hallo." They stood and hugged. "Glad to see ye again."

"Same here."

They separated and took each other's hands. "Ye look good."

"Thanks." Simon gave Callum's hand a squeeze. "Is everything all right with you? You seemed rather lost earlier."

"Bri and I had a blow-up last night and it's been bothering me. It all seems so pointless now."

"Doesn't sound as if you're still bothered."

"I'll see him again soon enough, though. We'll be able to sort it out in due time."

"Okay."

Callum shrugged and shook himself out to stand at his full height. "So. Any particular plans?"

"Not really." He released Callum's hand then slid his arm across his shoulders. "I figured we'd stop off for brekkies first but that's the extent of any planning I've done. Have you eaten yet?"

"No, I haven't. Is there anywhere in particular ye'd like to go?"

"There's a decent place not far from here, just up the road a bit and after that, it's anybody's guess."

"Should we at least pick another Tube stop fer later so we'll have some clue?"

"Sure." They walked over to the Underground map, Simon's arm still across Callum's shoulders. "Here goes."

Simon closed his eyes and circled his finger around the map three times before he pointed at a particular stop, then opened his eyes. "Kings Cross."

"Fucking hell," Callum muttered as they turned around to head out for breakfast. "Thundering herds of giggling Harry Potter fans ahoy. Just kill me now."

"Relax." Simon kissed Callum's temple. "I'm sure we can find a nice little chippie nearby or stop off for a pint." His lips lingered a few seconds longer as he kissed Callum's temple once more as they exited the station.

Once they'd arrived at the café, Simon held the door open for him. "This morning's starting out rather well," he said as he put his hand on the small of Callum's back.

"Aye. It might be cooler than yesterday." He paused. "Well, we've covered weather. Shall we talk about sport next?"

"Sorry. Not sure why I'm at such a loss for words right now. So. What'll it be?"

"Fry-up, I guess. Hold the black pudding, though." Callum shuddered. "Lord, the screaming matches at school every Thursday."

"The evil black pud for brekkies?"

"Aye. I'd trade somebody fer their stewed tomatoes when I could get away with it. Otherwise, it'd be the first thing off me plate. Thank God ye don't have to chew it. Hold

yer breath, slop it in, swallow it, and drink about a liter of tea after to make sure ye don't taste it."

Simon wrinkled his nose in disgust. "I'm the same way about stewed tomatoes. Try as I might, I'll never be man enough to eat those. I'll go order. Be right back." He kissed the top of Callum's head and went to the counter.

\* \* \* \*

At the Marks & Spencer near his flat, his so-called "retail therapy" hadn't helped Brian. As if it ever did. He'd tried it on the advice of some friends but always came away more depressed because he'd spent so much. Nothing had caught his fancy on the men's underwear displays and he was certain he had repeated many of the colors and styles. He hoped to have better luck at the M&S in Oxford Circus.

*I really need to apologize to Callum on Monday. Damn it. Once again, somebody else is right.*

Brian stepped off the bus and wound his way through the crowd in Oxford Street, the din of the people following him inside. He'd been to Debenhams, he'd been to Selfridges, he'd been to the George section at numerous Asda grocery stores, he'd even been to the mighty Harrods, but they hadn't compared to the cheap simplicity of M&S. He chuckled to himself as he easily made his way to the men's department, amused at how attached he'd become to a store.

*Which is much different than becoming attached to people, of course.*

Stores came and went and came back again. People had the tendency to go away with the possibility of their return in doubt. He began looking through the racks of men's unders.

*That's a rather hackneyed analogy. My loyalty to a store is the same as my loyalty to Callum.*

He would need more coffee if he was going to believe that.

Brian examined a pair of boxer briefs. They longer than what he was used to, but they were a great shade of purple and he thought he had the legs for it. He shrugged and smiled a little, then took another pair in the black he usually favored and went to the register.

Brian approached the register almost at the same time as an attractive Asian gent with longish hair that almost completely obstructed his beautiful dark eyes. They stood on opposite sides and were helped by different attendants. Brian glanced up as he set his backpack on the counter and removed his wallet from his rear pocket as he brushed his hair out of his face.

*Goodness. Those eyes.*

His heart melted even further when the stranger smiled at the attendant and briefly glanced over in Brian's direction. Brian quickly looked back at his own transaction.

The man watched as Brian waited for his change from the cashier. He handed a credit card to the cashier. Brian looked up again, but he and the stranger quickly looked down at the counters. Brian accepted his change and put it in his wallet as the other man put his wallet back into his pocket.

*How do I get another glimpse without it being obvious?*

Brian watched as he left and caught a brief glimpse of the back of his thigh through a tear in his jeans. He had a fair amount of hair, and it was rather hard to not notice the sky blue of his underwear.

*Seems to be in a hurry about something. Hope I didn't scare him off.*

As the man was about to pass through the second door and back out into the street, he turned and looked over his shoulder at Brian, then shrugged and mouthed "sorry". Brian waved, happy to have seen his eyes. He then turned and went back to the front of the store.

*I think I need to have a long talk with Callum come Monday.*

\* \* \* \*

Out on the walk, Avi turned around, a little disheartened Brian hadn't followed. "Shit," he muttered to himself as he hitched his backpack onto one shoulder and headed for the Tube station. "What the hell is it with men and principles these days?"

## Chapter Sixteen

Brian shifted in his seat on the train, at a loss on how he should approach Callum. It had to be done before work, just to help settle his stomach. To take his mind off the task at hand, Brian opened his copy of the *Guardian* to the letters to the editor. After he read two entries, he became more irritated (which surprised him because he generally agreed with letters from the readership), so he closed the newspaper and put it on his lap, and folded his hands over it. He stared out the window at the darkness of the tunnel and thought he should've avoided that extra cup of coffee before he left home.

Brian saw Callum as he approached the building, and was unsure what to make of his expression. It certainly wasn't the look of somebody who'd waited for an apology. "Hi," he quietly said and slowed his pace.

"Hallo, Bri."

"Hey. We've got some time before we have to start. Could we go somewhere a bit more private?"

"Aye. That'd be fine."

They went inside and took the lift down to the canteen; instead of getting a cup of tea, they walked past the canteen and through the glass doors that led outside to a lush terrace. It wasn't a popular morning spot, getting too much of the early sun, so they'd have a better chance at a more private conversation.

"Listen," Brian said as they walked to the far end of the terrace, "I really need to apologize for Friday night. It really wasn't fair of me to do that to you."

They stopped and faced each other.

"No, it really wasn't. Which is why I'm wondering if we maybe need to see each other less."

Brian paused. "Oh."

"Not completely break things off. Just less."

"Okay."

"Bri, Simon..."

"No. It's okay. You need me to be a bit more flexible."

"Simon travels a lot with his band and he's able to let me know well in advance when he won't be in town. That way, I can let ye know when I'll be able to see ye."

"Okay," Brian said, rather dubiously.

"Bri, we can still see each other. I've told ye Simon's in Essex this weekend and next."

"So. I'll be the auxiliary back-up plans."

"Brian, this isn't about ye! It's about me, ye sanctimonious prat! After the shit I've been through over the last few months, can't I be just a *little* selfish? Ye know I really like ye, Brian, but I also need to see if Simon fits into me life. Hell, fer all I know, it could be something completely meaningless. We see each other enough at work. I'd like to see Simon during the week and we could go out on the weekends."

"Unless otherwise noted."

"Aye."

Brian squeezed Callum's shoulder. "Sorry."

"I just wasn't expecting things to get so complicated so quickly."

"Neither was I." Brian gave Callum's shoulder a small shake. "Listen, I'm not trying to diminish the moment, but I really need to get back inside."

"No, that's fine. I think we understand each other fer the time."

"We do. I'll see you at break?"

"Aye."



Brian turned and walked back inside. The extra coffee he'd had before he left for work was starting to do a number on his bladder but he needed to hide for a moment to process his conversation with Callum more. He ducked into the men's room across the hall from the canteen. Inside, a quick glance around led Brian to believe he was alone, so he entered a stall and closed the door, then leaned against it as the tears began to burn.

*This isn't worth getting so worked up.*

He pulled a few squares of toilet paper off the roll.

*Then why am I?*

He wiped his eyes, then pounded the stall door with his fist. "Fuck!"

"Oy!" somebody a few stalls away said. "You okay down there?"

Brian blew his nose. "Yeah. I'm fine. Carry on." He threw the used paper into the bowl, then left the stall. Certain his day couldn't get any worse, he checked himself in the mirror over a sink then splashed some water on his face to help him collect his wits.

"Still," Brian muttered as he patted his face dry, "I was there first."

The all-knowing eyes of Natalie were upon Brian as he sat at his desk; the time spent in the restroom had made him a little late. He draped his jacket over the back of his chair and removed the contents of his in basket as he waited for his computer to boot. He flipped through the files and glanced up, his every move monitored by Natalie. He closed his eyes and sighed, then turned his attention back to his work. Natalie picked up a file folder off her desk and stood, then walked past Brian's desk. "Excuse me. Natalie?"

Natalie stopped and faced Brian. "Yes, Brian?"

"I've already notified Mr. Fairmerchant I was late this morning."

"I see, but I wasn't..."

"Natalie, your ruse would have worked if you weren't so particular about how your desk is organized. I happen to know for a fact that the folder you're carrying is from your stack of empties."

Natalie looked down at the file, then back at Brian. "Very well." She returned to her seat. "And please wipe that smirk off your face, Mr. Parker-Eddy," she continued as she put the folder back on its pile and sat down.

Brian refused to comply with her request.

\* \* \* \*

At his own desk, Callum massaged his temples. He no longer cared whose rules he was breaking or whose schedule he wasn't following. The shit had to stop and soon.

*Hard to believe I missed all of this when I first had the opportunity.*

He sat up then took a stack of work from his in basket and as he considered the consequences of setting it on fire his phone rang. "Hallo?"

"Hello, Callum." It was Simon. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"No, ye aren't." Callum set the folders down. "I've barely begun anything."

Simon laughed nervously. "Great. I need to talk to you and was hoping you're interested in dinner or a drink after work tonight."

"Aye."

"Great. Can you meet me at the Oxford Tube station?"

"No problem."

"Great." Simon paused awkwardly. "Great." He paused once more. "I need to stop saying 'great', don't I?"

"It is a tad overused."

"I'll see you after work, then."

"Take care." Callum hung up and shuffled his work around his desk.

*There needn't be any rules in the first place. It's not like whoever gets there first wins.*

\* \* \* \*

More than just a little early for their tea break, Brian walked over to Callum's desk and found him working, a small grin on his face.

"So," Brian whispered as he leaned over the edge of the desk. "Anybody I know?"

"What?" Callum asked, confused.

"Well, you're sitting there with this amused look."

"Oh. It's Simon."

"Ah." *Keep smiling, keep smiling.* "Who else?"

"Is Natalie at her desk? We need to check today's headlines."

"I pissed in her punchbowl earlier this morning, so I'm no longer her special friend."

"Maybe buying me a cuppa will help ye get over it."

"It's your turn, sirrah, may I remind you."

"Damnit." Callum said as he signed off on his report and closed the folder. "I was hoping ye wouldn't remember."

He stood and they left for the canteen, and they passed Natalie in the hall. Their smiles and nods were greeted with a roll of her eyes as she continued walking.

"That must've been one hell of a wee ye had," Callum whispered as they entered a lift. After the door had closed, Callum turned to Brian. "Anyway, I'll be meeting with Simon after work tonight."

"I see." Brian hoped his smile didn't look like he had a cramp. "Great."

"There's that word again."

"Eh?"

"Never mind."

\* \* \* \*

The heavy night air blasted Callum's face as he and Simon reached street level. "Sweet Jesus Christ," he said. "Are ye sure we can't go back down to the platform? There's at least thirty seconds where the trains move the air around."

Simon fanned himself. "That's not a bad idea. There are times I don't mind a good sweat, but this certainly isn't one of them."

"I'm not even sure why I bothered taking a shower this morning."

The afternoon rain had done nothing to quell the heat that hung over the city. It only drove up the humidity levels from merely tolerable to almost unbearable. The bright neon signs in Piccadilly illuminated the misery people had felt; collars were unbuttoned just one extra in the hopes of catching even the faintest of breezes, and many people carried jackets and blazers they'd worn at the start of the evening. Conversations seemed quiet and subdued, and couples were unwilling to hold hands, the extra contact a little too much. Simon and Callum continued down the street, hand in hand, past coffee and tea shops, take-away curry houses, an Italian place rumored to be the site of Heaven itself, and a rare neighborhood bakery. They were almost overwhelmed by the scents that were amplified by the humidity. Sweet cappuccino mingled with pungent chili and lemon, oregano and tomato swirled together, which met the comfort of fresh bread and fought against the cigarette of the bakery worker on break out on the walk. He took a final drag then flicked the butt out to the curb, nodding a quick hello to Simon and Callum before he went back inside.

A few steps down from the bakery, Simon steered Callum toward a pub. "Here we go."

He opened the door for Callum and a cool roll of air met them as they entered. Inside, Callum felt Simon rest his hand on the small of his back as they walked to the bar. It was a sweet gesture, to be sure, but there were more than a few "mixed" couples in the pub. Callum wasn't sure if they were in one of "those" pubs and he could relax.

"Guess what?" Simon rested his chin on Callum's shoulder while they waited for the bartender to bring their drinks. "I might have this weekend free, after all."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, but I won't be certain until Friday night, at the least." Simon held Callum's hand as they took their glasses to a table.

"I guess I'll have to clear it with His Majesty."

"Uh, oh."

"It's not that bad. I just told Bri that I'll be seeing ye during the week unless ye and I make other plans." Callum glanced down at Simon's hand and back up again. "He seemed to agree with it, but I'm not so sure."

"Maybe you should start carrying a diary to avoid any conflicts."

"Please. It'll just be one more thing fer me to lose. Besides, it's simple: Bri on weekends, ye during the rest of me time."

"Do we get to do swapsies in case of conflict?"

"Please don't make this any more complicated than it already is."

"I won't. Sorry." Simon leaned over and kissed Callum's forehead. "I just don't want to see you getting hurt."

"I won't. I'm just putting me needs first."

"These things have a habit of backfiring so be careful."

"Simon, I'm being honest with everybody, so everything should be fine."

The next morning at work, Callum explained the sudden change of events for his weekend with Brian. The miniature palm tree he'd spoken to in the lobby seemed to handle it well, so maybe it was time to try speaking to Brian.

"Okay," Callum said as he followed Brian into the staff kitchen. "I'm only trying to avoid another conflict, so I'm telling ye I might be seeing Simon this weekend."

Brian put his cans of Coke into the refrigerator. "That's fine."

"What do ye say we meet up fer a pint after work?"

"Sounds good. It just might give me an opportunity to start keeping score."

"Jesus, not ye, too. Try it and I'll strangle ye with yer ponytail."

"Callum..."

"Admit it: ye seriously considered it fer a second there."

"Of course not. It was two seconds."

Their conversation was interrupted by an appearance by Natalie. She paused in the doorway when she saw Callum and Brian near the refrigerator, then shuffled about as if she couldn't make up her mind to enter the kitchen or go back into the hall. Brian and

Callum exchanged glances, then walked out of the kitchen and gave her as much clearance as they could.

That Friday, Callum jumped every time his phone rang. It was the final day before his end of the month work was due, which meant a higher than usual number of phone calls. None of them were from Simon and it began to grate on his nerves.

"Damnit," he muttered after he'd hung up after another scheduled call. "What was that word Simon used the other day? 'Complicated'?"

With a quiet groan, he updated his work, certain Simon would call at any moment. When the phone rang again, it was just before Callum had to leave for the day. "Hallo?"

"Callum, it's me," another voice that wasn't Simon's said.

"Hallo, Bri." Callum tried not to sound disappointed.

"Sorry to bother you, but I'm backed up at my end. I've got my end of quarter work, as well. Lord knows when I'll be getting out. Any word from Simon?"

"No, not yet. I'm going to keep it open for him, in case he shows up on my doorstep."

"Well, have fun this weekend. See you Monday?"

"Sure, Bri. Have a good night." Callum hung up and leaned back in his chair. Brian didn't sound desperate, but Callum couldn't shake the feeling he was looking for any sort of signal they could spend time together. Callum shook his head.

*Bri, I'd let ye know.*

He glanced down at his phone again and it rang, which made him jump. He picked up the receiver. "Hallo?" he said, a bit too loudly.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you." It was Simon. Finally.

"It's okay. I'm fine."

"Almost ready?"

"I'm going to be cutting it rather close. We're on end of month work right now."

"Okay. Would you like to meet me at the Feather and Larch when you're through?"

Callum hesitated. "Actually, could we stop at that place we went to the other night? Rather nice there."

"Sure. No trouble. I'll start without you."

"See ye there." Callum hung up and stared at the phone with a smile.

*Something's going on here. And I think I like it.*

\* \* \* \*

Brian tried to ignore the phone and looked everywhere else but at it. It didn't work; he could still see it out of the corner of his eye. Every so often, he would either glance at it directly or he stop himself as he'd reach for it to call Callum.

"This has got to stop," he whispered to himself as he rubbed his forehead and looked at the phone again.

He gathered up the rest of the work he needed to deliver to Mrs. Yarrow then shut down his desk for the weekend and grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair. As much as Brian cared for Callum, he wasn't too keen on seeing him at that moment and he'd be able to miss Callum on the way out. Brian wondered as he walked to the lifts if the world would stop if he skipped *EastEnders* just the once and crawled into a bottle to settle his nerves. He stopped himself before he pressed the call button. Just the one, he promised himself, then he'd slink home with the biggest, smelliest, greasiest take-away to stuff himself and lick his wounds.

*Yeah, like I'm the victim here.*

He entered the lift, leaned against the back wall and closed his eyes, and vowed to be happy for Callum at least five minutes each day.

Or to at least try like hell.

## Chapter Seventeen

Down in the kitchen, Callum had just plugged in the electric kettle when the doorbell rang. "Who on earth?" he muttered.

Simon gave a small shrug. "I'm not expecting anybody."

Callum went to the door and opened it, surprised to see Brian on the front step. He was wearing a plain grey t-shirt and faded, well-loved blue jeans. "Hi, there. Since when do you support London Scottish Rugby?" He pointed at the jersey Callum wore.

"Bri. Hallo," Callum answered, aware he was standing at the door in his black boxer briefs. "It's a gift from Simon."

"Sorry to catch you unawares. I thought *I'd* been running late."

"Late? Fer?"

"Bloody hell. You've forgotten."

"Damn. We were supposed to go out this morning, weren't we?"

"I asked a couple weeks ago if you'd like to go to the pride festival today."

Callum shifted his weight so he was partially obscured by the door. He wasn't certain if Mrs. Wattle was due to come down the street, so he wanted to be sure she wouldn't see anything to offend her sensibilities. "I'm sorry if I'd said I'd go, but I've forgotten I had." He tried to smile a little.

"Forget to note it in your diary?"

"Aye. Must have."

"What's on, then?"



Callum rested his cheek on the door and tried to look as contrite as possible.  
"Actually, I told Simon I'd meet up with him today."

"Oh."

"I'm really sorry, Bri."

Brian ran his fingers through his hair. "No, it's okay. I was just hoping...nothing."  
He stepped down onto the lower step. "Don't worry. I'm not expecting you to cancel.  
Besides, we should have figured on this happening at some point."

"Maybe I could make it up to ye some time this week."

"Yeah. That'll work."

"Again, I'm really sorry, Bri."

"Don't worry, Callum. It'll be all right." He stepped up to Callum and gave him a small kiss. "I'll expect you to buy the first round."

Callum noticed the hint of chagrin on Brian's face. "Aye, of course. See ye tomorrow?"

"Of course." Brian gave a small wave as he turned and headed back down the walk.

When he was gone, Callum closed the door, then walked back into the kitchen.  
"Why didn't you tell me you were expecting Brian?" Simon asked as he handed Callum a mug.

"Because I'd completely fergotten he might have been over. I can't believe I did that."

Simon leaned on the counter's edge. "You didn't do it on purpose, did you?"

"Simon!"

"I'm just asking."

"Some nerve ye have. I'd never do anything like that."

"Sorry." Simon leaned over and kissed Callum's forehead.

"I barely remember agreeing to meet him today but I do remember not really wanting to go to the festival. Not that I have anything against it."

"After a while, lots of us seasoned veterans don't, either. I haven't been in about four years."

They sat at the kitchen table and Callum stared across the room at the wall while Simon watched him.

"This has got to stop," Callum said.

Simon reached out to stroke Callum's arm. "It's up to you."

Callum put his hand over Simon's. "I'm not talking about us. We hardly see each other enough as it is. I'm talking about me and Bri."

Simon smiled in encouragement while he kissed the back of Callum's hand.

"We'll see what happens," Callum continued.

"I know it's not going to help, but Manchester is only Friday night. I'll be back Saturday around tea time."

"Well, Bri's going to have to deal with it, then, won't he?"

"Be easy on him, now. He's still your friend."

"Don't worry. I will be."

Callum pondered his options on the train ride to work the next morning. One was to tell Brian that Simon's schedule had changed. Again. Be up front and honest, as Brian always asked him to be. Which sometimes caused Brian to flinch and pretend to be nonchalant, but only whine about it later. Or Callum could not tell Brian anything about it and just tell him innocuous, a neutral lie, like his parents were coming to town or he was going to visit them.

Or he could hope the *H.M.S. Belfast* would come barreling down the road and run him down at the next crosswalk.

Of course, it seemed Brian had chosen that day to attend Marks & Spencer's latest I'm Late For Work Sale. As Callum checked the clock every two minutes or so, he wondered if Brian would even show. About ten minutes after Brian's scheduled start time, Callum's phone rang.

"Sorry I'm late," Brian said. In the background, Callum could hear Brian unlocking his desk drawers and starting his PC.

"How were the lines at M&S?" Callum asked sarcastically.

"I actually didn't stop there. Honest. You can check the news, if you'd like, but my train was one of the ones running late today."

"No, I believe ye. But most important, did Fairmerchant?"

"His train was ahead of mine and almost just as late."

"Well, ye're here and in one piece."

"And getting baleful glances from one Miss Rodgers."

"Wave to the nice lady, Bri. Maybe she'll give ye a biscuit."

"Did everything turn out all right yesterday?"

"Sure. Everything went fine." Callum became more thankful he was speaking to Brian on the phone.

"So are we still on for the weekend?"

Callum paused. "Actually..."

Brian sighed and showed his irritation. "I'll take that as a 'no'. Again."

Without another word, Callum hung up.

\* \* \* \*

Brian stared at the phone, the dial tone a harsh reminder of what had happened. "Shit," he said to himself and hung up. He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face with both hands. "Oh, pants."

"Having a good day?" Natalie asked.

Brian couldn't tell if she was being sarcastically cheerful or cheerfully sarcastic. Either way, the urge to smack her chops had never been stronger. "Never you mind," he said in a quiet voice as he sat up.

"I'm not one to say 'I told you so', but..."

"Good. That means you'll button your yap."

"Oh, temper."

"Natalie. Please. No more."

"Yes, ma'am."

Brian tried to remember any of the ancient Gypsy curses he and his friends at school made up. Unable to think of any, he just stared at his desktop and rapidly clicked the button on his pen with his thumb. He'd blown it forever with Callum, so his best plan would be to let Callum calm down before he would apologize.

Brian wondered how would it come across. Like he was waiting for Callum to apologize? Like he was hoping enough time would pass and Callum would forget it? Like he was expecting Callum to take pity and forgive him?

No, it was up to him to take the first step so he sent a quick apology to Callum by email. The reply was almost immediate, but Brian tried to let it sit for a while before opening it. Less than two minutes later, he read it, the five words hitting hard:

*I'll see you next week.*

Brian let out a ragged sigh and deleted the email. "Damn," he whispered. That was all the proof he needed.

He'd totally blown it.

Well, not totally. Brian stared at his monitor for a moment. Apparently, Callum was giving him a chance to make it up again.

Either way, it meant a call to the parents for advice and a meal he wouldn't have to cook.

\* \* \* \*

Callum was surprised how quiet his tea and lunch breaks were without Brian. Not that Brian was rather chatty but it had been years since Callum had gone on break alone. He stared out the window to the courtyard. Just as he was getting used to the silence at home.

It was just a week, though.

Callum refused to feel guilty about it.

Or so he told himself as he and Brian barely glanced in the other's direction and nodded weakly in greeting as they passed each other in a hallway around their usual break time.

At the end of the day, Callum glanced over at the pile he needed to start the next morning, certain Natalie had held on to most of it until the very last minute. He locked up his desk, then put his jacket on and began to leave but had to stop after a few steps: he had begun walking in the direction of Brian's desk.

He turned around and headed for the nearest exit.

Callum hardly paid attention to the stops on the train ride home. He'd ridden the same line for so long, he could fall asleep and wake up at the stop before his without missing it. This time, however, when the Leicester Square stop was politely announced, he stood and joined the others around the doors and waited for the train to stop, all on autopilot.

Up on street level, Callum blinked and looked around. It wasn't until recently he needed to stop off in Leicester Square for anything, so the shops and teeming throngs were still a bit disorienting. He soon spotted the glowing HMV sign and set off in its direction.

In the store, Simon was helping another customer so Callum waited for him to finish. As he waited, Callum glanced down at the display in front of him, the names and faces of the performers completely alien. He picked up a CD and read the label, and another salesperson came over to him.

"Hello," she said in the bored manner that indicated she was required to be friendly to all the customers. "May I help you?"

"No, thank ye. I'm just waiting fer Simon."

The salesperson blanched. "Oh. I'm sorry. Is everything all right?"

"Aye, it is."

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

"I'm not here in any official capacity. I'm just here to visit Simon."

The salesperson seemed relieved. "Thank God. I'm sorry. Usually when somebody comes in and asks for Simon, one of the employees gets written up for some such or another."

\* \* \* \*

Simon looked away from his customer. Callum was talking to Jenna as he browsed through some CDs. He almost forgot his customer when Callum smiled, but turned his attention back after the customer asked Simon the same question twice.

After he'd escorted his customer to the till, Simon walked over to Callum. "Hello," he said, his voice almost inaudible over the music that played on the store's loudspeakers. He slipped his hand around Callum's waist and rested it on his lower back, then kissed Callum's forehead.

"Hallo, Simon."

"Are we on for something tonight?"

"No, we aren't. I gave Bri the week off."

"Oh, dear."

"He's just pushed me one too many times, Simon. I couldn't take one more episode of him playing the victim."

"How are you doing?"

"I'll be fine. I knew I shouldn't have even bothered in the first place. Like it's any surprise this has happened."

"You've been honest with him the whole time, yeah?" Simon asked as he leaned against the display bin.

"Aye, up one side and down the other, and it still chaps his hide."

Simon rubbed Callum's upper arm. "You're probably doing the right thing, then."

"Of course, who knows how much harder he'll try to pursue me after the week's up. Do many gay men date more than one bloke at a time?"

"Sure, to varying degrees of success. Many guys are looking to settle down but very few of them are serial daters."

"Christ, I'm not even sure if I want to settle down with anybody at this point. It's just...too soon."

Simon, certain he heard his heart break, reached out and took Callum's hand. "You'll figure something out. Until then, I'm willing to buy you a few pints to help you along."

"Thanks, Simon." He leaned forward to kiss Simon, but stopped.

Simon had felt his eyes start to close in anticipation of Callum's kiss but it didn't happen. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Callum's shoulders had hunched up toward his ears. "Well, it's not every day I kiss another bloke whilst standing in a store on the high street."

"You've obviously been in the wrong stores."

"Everybody here knows ye, so they must know, right?"

"I pay it no mind."

"But yer mum, her spies or God Himself might be watching."

"So? What are they going to do about it?"

"I don't know. Take ye off their Christmas card list? Report me to the Home Office as a security threat? Have St. Nick put us on his naughty list?"

"Tell Brian you were seen snogging another bloke?"

"I think he has that one figured out."

"Sorry. Cheap attempt at humor. You really don't have to worry, Callum. I can honestly say very few people here, if any, give a flying rat's arse if you kiss me."

Callum chuckled and relaxed his shoulders. "Well, ye work here and good little boys don't talk about or do these sort of things at work."

Simon kissed Callum's ear, then whispered, "Bullshite."

"Beg pardon?"

"Just what I said."

As their lips met, the world around Simon suddenly became silent. The people in the store stopped talking and the music stopped playing over the loudspeakers. Simon closed his eyes and put his arms around Callum, figuring he'd complain about it when it stopped being so pleasant.

After they'd broken the kiss, they stood close together and touched foreheads. "Would you like to go out for a drink?" Simon quietly asked. "I'm off in about an hour."

"No, that's all right," Callum whispered. "Tomorrow night, then?"

"That's fine." Simon kissed the tip of Callum's nose. "Meet me here after work."

"Okay." Callum kissed Simon once more for luck.

"Take care."

"I'll be all right." Neither seemed to be in any hurry to release the other. Simon had felt a growing affection for Callum, and he became more smitten each time they met.

Finally, Simon whispered, "I really need to get back to work."

Callum chuckled and blushed. "Sorry."

"It's okay. I'm enjoying the time together."

"Me, too." Callum kissed Simon once more. "Tomorrow after work."

"Tomorrow after work," Simon repeated before he kissed Callum. They laughed as Callum pulled away from Simon and left the store with a wave. Simon smiled as he bit his lower lip, completely charmed by the way Callum had blushed as he left.

\* \* \* \*

Callum tried to hold his position but as much as he told Simon otherwise, he felt bad for Brian's exile. "It feels like he's growing colder and more distant," he said as he and Simon waited for their drinks at the Wellington near the end of the sentence.

"He's probably just as upset as you over this."

"Aye, but he's the one who's supposed to be punished, not me."

"Well, you are trying to make a point, aren't you?"

"Aye."



The bartender brought over their drinks. "Besides," Simon continued, "it's not like you told him to piss off entirely."

"I know, but I still feel awful. I think I'll call Brian tomorrow and offer a reprieve."

"Are you sure about that?" Simon asked, concerned. "It's Thursday tomorrow."

"Aye, I think so. I just want to let him know we're still friends, at least."

"Well, let me know if things change."

"Of course, Simon. Ye'll be the second person to know."

"But call if you need to, okay?"

"I will. After all, it's not going to get any less complicated, right?"

Simon picked up his glass and shrugged.

"Right?" Callum asked again, and Simon shrugged again as he had a sip of his bitter.

"Bloody hell," Callum muttered and picked up his cider. "Such confidence ye instill."

Simon shrugged once more as Callum rolled his eyes and shook his head. Confident or not, he had to go with his gut once more and hope he could set things right before he lost Brian altogether.

Callum waited until their usual tea break time before calling Brian. "Bri? It's Callum."

"Callum. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks. Listen, I was wondering if ye were up fer a pint tonight after work."

"Sure. Absolutely."

"Are ye able to make it away fer tea?"

"Sure. Yes."

"Why are ye so surprised?"

"Well, you said until Monday."

"And I'm letting ye off the hook a little early. Now, are ye coming to tea with me or not?"

"Yeah. Sounds fine."

"Great. I'll be there in a moment." Callum hung up. "God, I hope I know what I'm doing," he muttered to himself as he stood and went to Brian's desk.

\* \* \* \*

Brian hung up and smoothed down his tie a little. Should he apologize right away or wait for Callum to mention it first? The moment felt awkward as Callum approached.

"Hi, there," Brian said as he fought the urge to hug him.

"Hallo, Bri." As they stood next to Brian's desk, neither knew what to do next. "Ye...look great today. Color suits ye."

"Oh. Thanks. Believe it or not, I actually bought these. For once."

"Looks great."

"Oh, just kiss and make up, already," Natalie hissed as she walked by to go around the corner to wait for them to leave.

That seemed to shake them from their stupor. They started to laugh, Brian with a little snort. "Shall we?" he asked and motioned to Callum to follow him to the lifts.

## Chapter Eighteen

Callum turned over onto his side and put his hand on somebody's stomach. The sudden shock of the coarse hair under his fingers quickly woke him up. With a gasp, Callum pulled his hand away, sat up, and opened his eyes. He looked down at the other person in his bed and remembered Brian had spent the night. Callum rubbed his hand over his eyes then lay down again.

"Is it time to get up?" Brian quietly asked.

"No, it's still dark out."

"Are you okay?"

"Aye. Bad dream, I guess. Fergot where I was fer a moment there."

Brian turned onto his back and put his arms around Callum. Almost asleep again, he rubbed Callum's forearm. "You're fine, babe. 'S'okay."

Callum's eyes flew open and he sat up again. "What did ye just call me?"

Brian also sat up and tried to focus. "What?"

"Did ye just call me 'babe'?"

Brian propped himself up on his elbows and squinted at Callum. "The hell are you talking about? I might have. I dunno."

"What the hell fer?"

"Callum. Look. It's," Brian checked the clock, "god awful in the morning. Neither of us are awake enough to be having this conversation."

"Sorry. I just wasn't expecting it. I've always associated little pet names like that with a deeper meaning in a relationship."

Brian leaned his head back and took a deep breath. "Callum, I've called lots of guys 'babe' over the centuries, usually in the throes of orgasm. If it's that threatening to you, I won't do it again. I wasn't aware I'd crossed any boundaries."

"I din't mean to jump all over ye, Bri."

"I hate to be rude, but are we finished here?"

"Aye. I think so."

"You can release all your relationship insecurities on me when we get up in a few hours, okay?" Brian said as he rearranged the blankets around himself and closed his eyes. "I'll even make the tea."

"Okay." Callum lay down next to Brian, taking care to rest his hand on Brian's stomach on top of the blanket.

\* \* \* \*

Brian's mood had improved by the time the alarm clock sounded, so he got out of bed, put on his blue jeans, and went down to the kitchen to fix breakfast. Callum's earlier outburst had bewildered him but he was certain he couldn't deal with it until after he'd had some coffee. He looked through a few cabinets to find the "nice" coffee; the situation called for something better than the instant Callum usually favored in the morning. He had just located a bag of beans and was reaching for the grinder when the phone rang.

"Bri, could ye get that?" Callum called downstairs.

Callum had left the phone on the kitchen counter, so Brian picked it up and answered it. "Hello?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," a quiet voice at the other end said. "I was looking for Callum MacInnes."

"Sure. One moment, please." Callum had come downstairs so Brian walked into the front room with the phone.

Callum had put on a black t-shirt and matching silk boxer shorts. "Who is it?" Callum asked as he took the phone from Brian.

"I didn't ask. He's got a sexy voice, though." As Brian walked back into the kitchen to make the coffee, he wondered where Callum had gotten the underclothes.

*Silk?*

\* \* \* \*

"Hallo?"

"Good morning, Callum," Simon said. "I was afraid I'd gotten the wrong number."

"Oh, that was Bri. I wasn't able to get to the phone right away so I asked him to pick up."

"How are you today?"

"I'm not certain." Callum sat down on the couch. "Brian called me 'babe' earlier this morning and I got a wee bit upset over it."

"Why would you?" Simon asked.

"Just a bit unexpected, really. It's not every day anybody calls me that," Callum replied.

"Maybe he just likes you a lot?" Simon said. "Avi calls people who are close to him 'dear.' After a while, he starts to sound like somebody's nan."

"I've always felt names like that are meant for something more serious than what Bri and I have."

"Did you tell him it bothered you?"

"I did mention it, but neither one of us was lucid enough to deal with it at the time, though."

"I wouldn't read too much into it."

"Aye, ye're right. It might have just been an innocent slip."

"Feeling better?" Simon asked.

"Aye, I guess I am," Callum answered.

"That's good. Anyway, I'm calling because I'd like to see if you and Brian are available to come out to Whip Smart."

"Sure. When would ye like us to be there?"

"Two weeks' time okay?"

"Aye. That should work. I'll ask Bri if he's available."

"Great. And I'm still really sorry about last time you tried to go. It'll work out. I promise."

"I'll hold ye to it."

"Well," Simon continued, even more quiet than earlier, "I need to get going. I'm opening this morning and it's getting late."

Callum rested his elbows on his knees. "Thanks for calling. It's always nice to hear from ye."

"Pop by the store after work Monday and I'll take you out for a suitably greasy dinner, yeah?"

"Sounds delightful. I can hear me arteries hardening already."

"Take care and I'll see you then."

"Bye, now." Callum switched off the phone then leaned back into the couch with a smile. He thought it would be nice to see Simon more often but Callum figured between weeknights with Simon and weekends with Brian, he was spending equal time with them both. However, he still didn't know Simon as well as he wanted.

The sound of the coffee grinder jolted Callum back into reality, so he walked into the kitchen. "Ye don't have go through all that."

Brian poured some water into the coffee maker. "It's no trouble. I just figured you could use some real coffee after earlier this morning."

"I'm not traumatized, Bri, but thank ye just the same." Callum went to the refrigerator and took out some eggs and bacon. "That was Simon on the phone," he

continued as he set them on the counter next to the refrigerator then took out the milk. "He's invited us to Whip Smart to see Difficult Position. Again."

"Will he be there this time?"

"He promises. I think we can count on it, though." As Callum opened the cupboard for a can of beans, Brian came up from behind and put his arms around Callum's stomach then kissed his neck.

"Morning." Callum turned around and put his hands on Brian's chest.

"Morning," Brian said and kissed Callum.

Brian's mustache brushed against Callum's nose and once again, ruined the mood. "Christ." Callum laughed and rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. "I'm getting over that. Really."

After breakfast, Callum and Brian took their coffee to the front room. Callum flipped through the television channels with the remote as Brian rested his head on Callum's shoulder. "It's times like this I'm thankful fer children's programming."

He stopped on a cacophony of bright, moving colors, obnoxious music and a hyperactive, screechy presenter.

"But then again," he said as he switched the channel.

"What's the difference between that show and one of the motoring programs on at the same time?" Brian asked as he took a sip of coffee.

"The number of syllables the presenter uses?"

"You've got a better chance of the presenter swearing on children's television?"

"Or showing up inebriated?"

"Or nude photos appearing on a porno web site?"

Callum continued to hit the button on the remote. "I can't shake the feeling we should be doing something more enlightened or cultural."

"Yeah, but considering how much you're paying for your television and radio license, and satellite on top of that, you need to justify the expense with random flipping."

"Why can't they meet me halfway? Ye'd think they'd offer at least an hour worth watching."

"Not even the news channels?" Brian asked then set his mug on the coffee table.

"Those are good fer the nights I can't get to sleep." Callum switched off the television then dropped the remote on the couch. "I feel like we should be doing something."

Brian closed his eyes and slipped his arm across Callum's shoulders. "Such as?"

"I dunno. Something. Anything other than sitting here on me sofa."

"Well," Brian whispered as he leaned over and kissed Callum's ear.

"I meant something outside the house."

"Oh." Brian removed his arm from Callum's shoulders and leaned away from him.

"Sorry, Bri. Wrong sort of stimulation."

"We could go to the cinema?"

"And wind up snogging in the back row."

"Too late to get decent tickets to a stage show, then."

"And we'd wind up playing footsies in the dark."

"You make it sound like such a bad thing."

"Bri, we've gone at it just about every time we've gotten together. It's not required we fuck, is it?"

"Well..." Brian paused awkwardly. "No, but...I mean, it's a nice idea, but it's certainly not required."

"Well, as much as I fancy yer nekkid bum, I guess me libido's wired differently."

"Really? You like my arse?"

"It's nice. I guess. Of course, I haven't much comparison to go on."

"Is that your favorite part?"

"No. It's yer eyes and ye know it."

"Really?"

"Aye. They're the first thing I look at when I see ye." Callum leaned his head on Brian's shoulder. "It's the first thing I remember seeing the first day at work. Ye were



concentrating on something on yer desk and the way ye looked up at me was sweet and shy. Of course, there's that smile of yers. It that's friendly yet dangerous at the same time, like I know I'll get into trouble whenever ye smile at me."

"That became sort of a signal at St. Apollonaria's. If I smiled at you, you could count on getting bent over one of the headstones in the cemetery behind the school's chapel with your drawers around your ankles and your ass around my face."

"Sounds...wholesome."

"Usually worked, too."

"Din't ye ever get caught?"

"Not until I was seventeen, anyway, and then it was a couple times by Deacon Wilkins."

"I can see where this is going and I'm going to pretend I never heard it."

"What? He wasn't even a full vicar or anything. He was a deacon for most of my time there. Besides, I was seventeen. Age of consent and all. It was only the three times. But then somebody caught wind of it and the headmaster would come out after that."

"Not him, too?"

"No, he was a thousand if he was a day so I wasn't sure if his system could handle it."

"Bri..."

"Kidding, kidding. I was already in enough trouble with my parents."

"Remind me to get ye a conscience fer yer next birthday."

## Chapter Nineteen

Slow days at work usually meant Brian could spend more time than usual larking about. This particular week, however, it only afforded him more time to think. The lull in the routine, coupled with the fact it was a Tuesday gave Brian the chance to mull over his current situation. It had been some time since he'd been notified of the possible promotion, something he was certain he'd obsess over needlessly, but it was all but pushed out of his mind by Callum. Even though he was forgiven, Brian wondered if there was any way he could make it up. He tapped his pen on his desk a few times then picked up the phone and called his parents. It hadn't been very long since his last visit but he figured he would invite himself over for the weekend and let Callum have all the time he wanted with Simon.

For that week, anyway.

Brian wasn't certain if it would be appropriate to hold Callum's hand on the walk to the chippie for lunch as he told him about the upcoming weekend.

"I got a call from my mother today." Brian slipped his fingers around Callum's. "She and Dad have invited me out to their place for the weekend."

That was almost true, right? It wouldn't count against him in the grand scheme of things, right?

"Ah, sunny Croydon." Callum rubbed the back of Brian's hand with his thumb.

"I'll be going out after work on Friday and back some time on Sunday evening. Even though it's just over an hour on the trains, it doesn't make any sense for me to

come back home and go back out again the next morning. Dad needs help repairing a trellis in the back garden and Mum...well, Mum won't admit it, but she just wants me around. Only child syndrome and all."

"I did that for the first six months I was at university. I knew there was a problem when I started falling asleep in front of the telly around seven each night."

"That's when all the good stuff starts."

They'd reached the chippie so Callum released Brian's hand and held the door open for him. "Mum complained because me dad, me brother, and I were all falling asleep within fifteen minutes of each other. She couldn't take a front room full of snoring blokes when she was trying to watch her shows."

Brian looked around at the large crowd. "We've just made it once again. If the fish here weren't so good, I'd say let's try elsewhere."

"No sense wasting any more time we don't have."

"Have fun with Simon this weekend."

"Thanks, but I'm not sure he's available."

"What?" Brian's voice cracked a little, so he cleared his throat and tried again. "Really?"

"Aye. Difficult Position aren't playing anywhere and I don't know if Simon is working at HMV this weekend. I'll ask him when I see him later tonight, though."

"Great." Brian turned his attention to the menu over the front counter so Callum couldn't see him roll his eyes.

*Great.*

"May I help you?" the cashier asked.

"Yes, I'll have the cod," Brian replied.

"Sorry. All out. All we have is the haddock."

Brian tried to stifle a laugh. "That'll be fine."

\* \* \* \*

The sky clouded over during lunch on Friday and the breeze cooled down a little, but there didn't seem to be any hints of the rain promised by the forecast. Callum had bought and lost so many umbrellas in his lifetime he was certain he'd get caught in any deluge as he went to HMV to meet Simon. As he stepped into the store, he turned and looked outside again. Surprised to find the streets were still dry, he took it as a sign that his luck had changed.

Simon had just switched out the last till drawer when Callum entered the store. He picked up the stack of three drawers and gave Callum a quick kiss. "Hi, there. I'm running a little late tonight so you'll have to come back in a few."

"I'll just go up the road and grab a quick tea, then. See ye there." Callum kissed Simon then left the store, his cheeks a little flushed.

Callum had his choice of tables in the empty coffee shop. He thought about the one closer to the door, but didn't want Simon to think he was too desperate. Then there was the question of at which angle he would sit. If he sat with his back to the door, Simon would think he was avoiding him. If he sat facing the door directly, Simon would think he was anxious to see him. Callum eventually settled on a table that was almost exactly between the front door and the counter, and sat so that he faced the wall perpendicular to the front door.

Just before he ordered, Callum paused then leaned on the back of the chair. He laughed to himself and wondered if he should be amused or frightened by his schoolboy behavior. He couldn't believe how silly he'd been, certain Simon would brand him a ninny for the fuss he made over where to sit in a coffee shop. Still smiling, he straightened up with a flustered groan and went to the counter for some tea.

Callum was halfway through his second cup when Simon entered the shop. "Hello." Simon leaned over and kissed Callum. "Sorry I was so long."

"Madhouse today?" Callum asked.

They exchanged another small kiss and Simon sat down. "Very." He put his hand over Callum's. "It shouldn't be a complete surprise, since it is Friday."

"So what's on the agenda for this evening?"

"Let's see. I was thinking we could start with a nice quiet dinner, followed by coffee somewhere nice and quiet, and finally back to my place for some quiet snuggling."

"How do ye do that?" Callum turned his hand over so their palms touched. "Ye work in a record store and ye're in a band. I'd be mad outside of a week."

"I'm seriously considering earplugs at this point. It's easier than quitting one of my jobs." Simon closed his eyes and sighed. "So peaceful in here. Managing a coffee shop couldn't be much different than a record shop. They're both shops."

As if on cue, one of the baristas put a particularly annoying jazz CD on the shop's loudspeakers. Simon opened his eyes and cast a baleful glance in the counter's direction.

Callum tried not to laugh. "Shall we go now?"

Simon looked back at Callum. "Oh, let's do."

Callum picked up his jacket and briefcase from the table and they left the coffee shop hand in hand.

"God, I think I sold them this CD earlier today."

"Aye, Simon, they're doing it only to bother ye."

"No, I'm not that paranoid. I can tell when somebody thinks they've hatched an ingenious plot against me." Just as Simon spoke, it began to rain. "See? Like that?" They ran to the nearest Tube station.

Just inside, Callum and Simon leaned against the wall. "Well. I'm a mess." Callum shook the water off his briefcase.

Simon put his arms around Callum's waist. "But such a handsome mess."

"Please. I look like a gutter rat."

"No, really."

"Stop it." Callum ducked his head down.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Simon put his fingertips under Callum's chin and tipped his head up.

"Don't worry. I'm not about to pitch a strop or anything. I'm just not used to people...*men* telling me I'm handsome." Callum rolled his eyes. "I'm silly, I know."

Simon stroked Callum's hair. "I hope you'll get used to it, as I'm bound to say it once in a while."

"Aye, I've noticed that. I do appreciate it, Simon."

Simon kissed Callum's forehead. "I also hope you don't mind it if you catch me staring into your eyes. I could just drown in them sometimes."

Callum gave Simon a small kiss. "I'm sure ye can even hear me blushing right now."

"That's when you're the most adorable."

"Oh, stop."

"Now, I'm not saying you aren't adorable any other time."

"That's a huge leap, from handsome to adorable."

Simon laughed. "Okay! Yes! I think you're handsome. I think you're adorable. I think you're cute. I think you're very, very attractive. I find myself thinking about your eyes and your smile often. I think about the next time I'll be seeing you and remember what it feels like to just hold you." He stroked Callum's cheek with the back of his hand. "God, I'm embarrassing the hell out of myself right now."

Callum took Simon's hand and kissed the palm. "I like the way it makes me feel, though."

"And me, Callum." Simon kissed Callum once more then led him to the turnstile. "Off to your place so you can change for dinner?"

"I think I can be convinced." They held hands as they fed their transit cards into the readers and on the ride down to the platform, neither willing to lose contact with the other, afraid they'd lose the moment.

\* \* \* \*

At his parents' house, Brian looked out the French windows that led to the back garden. "I think I can hear your roses sighing in relief, Dad."

"Unfortunately, it probably won't be enough this weekend to help lift the watering restrictions," Brian's father said as he topped off Brian's wine.

"I think we'd be in for the standard forty days and nights for that to happen."

"Thanks again for stopping out this weekend," Brian's mother said as she set the dining room table.

"Oh, no trouble at all. I just...needed to come out and visit for a bit," Brian answered, trying to remain conversational and breezy. "Is all."

"Hope you don't mind we're putting you to work repairing that trellis tomorrow," his father said.

"Don't worry. It's a two person job and Mum said her shoulder's been giving her grief."

"All this humid weather but no rain," she said as she walked into the front room and sat next to Brian's father. "I never realized how serious Dad was when he told me how it settled in his bones."

"All well with you, Brian?" his father asked he handed Brian's mother her glass.

"Oh...fine." Brian traced his finger along the fabric pattern on the chair's armrest.

"Still seeing Callum?"

Brian almost talked over his father. "Goodness, Mum, whatever you're making for dinner smells fantastic."

He drained his wine in one gulp.

Brian's parents exchanged a worried glance. "Dear, are you all right?"

Brian set his glass on the end table. "As well as can be expected when the bloke I'm seeing is dating somebody else, as well."

"Brian," his mother began in a cautious tone.

"I know, I know." Brian shifted around in his chair. "I thought I knew what I was doing when all this started."

"So are you in love with Callum?"

"No, not any more than a friend. I don't think."

"Oh, Brian." His mother sighed.

"It's not that, Mum. I am attached to him to some degree, but not where I'm planning my entire life around him." Brian ran his fingers through his hair. "It's just nice

having him to do things with and have him pay attention to me, I guess. I just haven't had any close friendships for a while."

Brian's father looked at him over the top rims of his glasses. "Sounds to me like you're confusing relationship terms."

"Honest. I'm trying not to. It's not as if I was starved for attention when I was growing up."

"Still, you prefer your solitude," Brian's mother said.

"What happened with *him* really helped cement that." Brian snorted and refilled his glass. "It's nice having Callum as an excuse to get out more often, though."

"Good Lord, I can't begin to count the number of times I'd ask you your weekend plans before you began seeing Callum and you'd answer you were either just staying in or off to Marks & Spencer," Brian's mother said. "Made me wonder if you were turning into a hermit."

"I went out plenty before Callum and I started dating," Brian protested.

"With whom?" his father asked.

Brian leaned back in his chair. "Nobody," he muttered and took a sip of his wine.

"But you stopped going out after a while?"

"It was easier to stay at home and hide under the duvet. Safer emotionally, as well."

Brian's mother shook her head. "You're an odd little duck, Brian. I swear I'll never understand you."

"That makes two of us."

"So what are you going to do if Callum and this other bloke get a bit more serious?" his father asked.

"Probably grimace and tell everybody I'm smiling. Wish them the best. Go home and drink several bottles of beer. Puke on my shoes. Find a new playmate out on the school yard."

"Ah, maturity."

"Thank God I won't fall into that trap," Brian said and rolled his eyes.



\* \* \* \*

The rain continued through the night, into the next morning. Simon had left the window open a little and Callum felt a chill in the bedroom, so he pulled the duvet up a bit more and turned onto his side. Simon turned over, as well, and moved closer.

"Morning," Callum whispered.

"Hello." Simon kissed the back of Callum's neck and put his arm around Callum's waist.

"How are ye doing?"

Simon yawned. "I feel like I could use a few more hours."

"Same here. It's barely even light out."

"Last one to sleep is a Tory MP." Simon kissed Callum's neck again just as the alarm went off. He turned over and switched it off, then glanced out the window to find the clouds had started to clear away to reveal patches of blue. He dropped his head back onto his pillow and put his arm over his eyes. "Damn."

"What's wrong?"

"It looks to be another bright, cheerful day."

Callum groaned and pulled the blankets over his head. "Make it stop."

"Would that I could." Simon moved his arm then prodded the Callum-shaped bundle next to him. "Shower and then brekkies?"

Callum pulled the duvet down. "Ye're trying to wake me up, aren't ye? It won't work."

"Come on. You can't expect me to face the world alone now."

"All right." Callum sat up on his elbows and looked out the window. "Thank God the trees are blocking most of the cheeriness."

"Let's go, before Avi gets to the shower first." Simon leaned over and kissed Callum's shoulder.

"Okay. I'm getting up now." Callum made no attempts to move. "Okay, then. Now."

Again, he remained motionless.

"You're a difficult one to get moving in the morning, aren't you?"

"I usually rail against the whole weekend mentality but it's just a bit different today." Callum looked up at Simon and smiled. "Morning."

"Morning." Simon put his hand on Callum's chest and they kissed again, a bit more passionately this time. "Come on. We can continue this in the shower."

"Okay." Callum climbed out of bed, found his underwear and slipped it on.

Simon stood nude at the door. "You don't have to do that."

"I know, but Avi might..." Callum trailed off.

"You're right. Sorry." Simon held the bedroom door open for Callum.

"Thanks." Callum left the bedroom and walked across the hall to the bathroom. Simon hadn't followed. "Well? Aren't ye joining me?"

Simon left his bedroom doorway. "Actually, I'm glad you did put on your unders. Your ass is particularly hot in that shade of red." He entered the bathroom and closed the door.

Callum kissed him. "Thanks."

"Do me a favor and turn on the tap."

Callum arched an eyebrow, uncertain what to expect. "Okay."

As Callum waited for the water to warm up, Simon knelt behind him. He ran his hands up Callum's legs and massaged them as he went.

"God, you've got beautiful thighs." He lingered on them for a bit then closed his eyes and leaned forward to nibble up Callum's right thigh.

Callum laughed. "Simon, that tickles."

"Good." Simon bit Callum's ass cheek.

Callum stood up and tried to bend away from Simon. "Simon!" He tried to stifle his laughter as Simon tried to nibble on his ass.

"Yes?" Simon put his arms around Callum and rested his head on the small of Callum's back.

Callum reached around and stroked Simon's head as best he could. "I think the water's warm enough." He bent over a bit and Simon bit his cheek again.

"Good!" Simon reached up and pulled Callum's underwear down in one quick motion. He stood up and they stepped into the bathtub. After Simon had closed the curtain, he leaned over Callum and flipped the spigot to the shower.

The hot water was a sudden change to the cool morning air in the bedroom. After they had soaked themselves, Simon picked up his soap and began to wash Callum, Callum's back pressed against his chest. As Simon washed him, Callum tipped his head back and reached around behind him to hold Simon by the hips. He closed his eyes and relaxed as Simon massaged him. Simon wrapped his arms around Callum's chest and kissed his ear, and Callum put a hand over Simon's. They remained motionless for a few moments and took in the feeling of being together for the time.

Their reverie was soon broken by a knock on the bathroom door. "Gents?"

"Shit. Avi's up earlier than I'd expected. Double time." They quickly finished their shower then dried each other, and Simon kissed Callum before they wrapped towels around themselves and left the bathroom.

"All yours," Simon said to Avi.

"Morning," Avi said.

"Morning," Callum muttered back. He glanced down at the floor and pulled the towel around his waist a bit tighter before he followed Simon back to his room. Avi shrugged then went into the bathroom.

Back in Simon's bedroom, Simon put on a pair of jeans and Callum his underwear, t-shirt and socks.

"Callum," Simon said as he combed out his hair, "could you go put the kettle on? I'll be a little bit with this mess."

"Aye." Callum kissed Simon and went down to the kitchen.

In the unfamiliar territory of Simon and Avi's kitchen, Callum paused for a moment. "Now. If I were the tea, where would I be?"

He found the electric kettle on the counter, so he opened the cabinet over it. "Hey, presto." He took out the tin of tea and checked the kettle, then added some water and plugged it in. As he measured some tea into a teapot, somebody came into the kitchen.

"Morning again," Avi said. "Is the kettle about ready?"

Callum flipped the spoonful of tea he had onto the counter in surprise. "Avi!" He turned around, aware he wasn't wearing his jeans.

Avi opened up the newspaper he held. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"No, it's just...I mean...I need to...finish making the tea?" Callum turned around again and grabbed the edge of the counter.

Much to his horror, one of the chairs moved over the floor as Avi sat down and opened his newspaper on the tabletop. The kettle clicked off and echoed in the silent kitchen. Callum had forgotten to warm the teapot so he poured the water over the loose tea, then put the top on the pot, afraid any noise would distract Avi and cause him to look him his direction.

Callum tapped his fingers uneasily on the counter and plotted his escape. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Avi was distracted by the newspaper, then turned around. "Tea's about ready. I'm just going back upstairs and...finish getting dressed."

"Okay." Avi continued doing the crossword. "Thanks for making it."

"Okay." Callum quickly left the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

Finally feeling a bit more presentable, Simon pulled on a shirt and passed Callum on the stairs. "I'll be back down in a moment," Callum said, his cheeks a bit flushed. "Avi's down there already."

*Ah. That explains the extra color.*

"Right, then. Thanks again for putting the kettle on." Simon kissed the tip of Callum's nose.

"I'll...get dressed." Callum went upstairs and back into Simon's room.

Simon continued down to the kitchen. "Morning, Avi."

Avi looked up from his newspaper. "Morning. What's a ten-letter word for 'the she-lion on the cheese grater'?"

"*Lysistrata*," Simon replied without thinking.

Baffled, Avi filled in the answer on his crossword. "Bloody hell. How'd you know that?"

"I studied it in my final year at school. The paper I wrote scandalized the entire teaching staff and threatened my standing in the ranks."

"Amazing the knowledge one retains." Avi folded the newspaper back up. "By the way, tell your boyfriend he's got a cute ass."

"I'm sure he'd appreciate that."

"Not as cute as mine, but nonetheless."

"Oh, please don't make me choose. You'll only be disappointed by the outcome."

## Chapter Twenty

For the first time in ages, Callum actually looked forward to going to work. His job satisfaction hadn't changed, but the time behind his desk gave him a break from the mad frenzy of Monday through Thursday evenings with Simon and weekends with Brian. Simon didn't give the impression he minded his going out with Brian, but Brian still seemed a little flinchy over the subject of Simon, all but going out of his way to avoid it.

Unfortunately, Callum also found himself focusing more on Simon than Brian. Or maybe not "unfortunately." Brian had been a constant for so long in his life, Simon had become either a welcome distraction or an attractive nuisance. After such a long time of Theresa complaining about who he'd spent his time with, it was nice to have a new friend.

Then, too, was the question of how good a friend Simon was. Was he a friend? Was he a good friend? Was he a boyfriend? A lover?

Holy cats, was there a special term he needed to find or ask Brian about because he certainly couldn't figure it out?

But what would he call Brian? Another good friend? His other boyfriend? That other handsome geezer with the gorgeous eyes and long hair?

Callum dropped his pen on his desk, then rubbed his face with both hands with a groan.

What was that Mum always said about sex and how it always mucked things up, no matter how much fun? Especially if it was fun?

\* \* \* \*

Simon wasn't able to concentrate on his job very well, either; his thoughts always drifted back to Callum. His beautiful brown eyes, the way he smiled, his Scottish accent, the way he kissed, his cute ass, his laugh, his bushy mustache, his hairy ass, the way he looked in his underwear or how he slept, his hands—everything about him. Callum was an intelligent bloke, as well, and how much they had in common (besides the decent sex), but the image of Callum in his red briefs took over and caused Simon to wonder how he would look in purple. It happened once while he was at the till and he had to smile and laugh to himself. The customer he had assisted gave him an odd look as he handed her the bag, and he blushed as she left.

Things were a bit sticky since he hadn't met this Brian person and only knew who he was by Callum's mention. He didn't feel it was his place to question Callum's relationship with Brian, since Simon still lived with his ex and all, but it would be easier to make his peace with it once they'd finally had the chance to meet at the upcoming Whip Smart gig. Just to put a face to the name.

Not that Brian was in any way competition—oh, no. Callum had reassured him there was no romantic interest between them (repeatedly), so he left it at that.

\* \* \* \*

Brian was pleased to see Callum had begun to smile and appeared to have adjusted well to his post-divorce life. He had almost convinced himself (almost) that Callum seeing Simon didn't bother him, but he continued to feel a tiny twinge of jealousy. The conversation with his parents made sense so he tried to focus more on himself during

the week, thankful for the Wednesday lull when *EastEnders* wasn't on so he could spend more time out and about.

Which wasn't such a good idea, after all.

Brian started a pattern of stopping at the Feather and Larch almost every evening after work. As much as he hated going out during the week, it was pop over to the pub for a quick pint or three then dash home in time for that ever important night of telly. After two weeks of boozily flipping through channels when his show was over, Brian thought back to what he had done before the whole froofraw with Callum began. All he could conjure up was flipping through the channels while sober.

He turned off the television and dropped the remote on the couch to sit in the dim evening light. He wondered if this was the life he'd expected to live when he was fourteen years old. He'd lived peacefully in solitude before. Couldn't he do it again?

Of course, that was before he'd been distracted by Callum.

\* \* \* \*

After work, Simon all but skipped home from the train station. He went into the kitchen and found Avi, dressed a Motorhead t-shirt and boxer shorts, as he fumbled with the kettle at the sink. "Morning." Simon said in a bright tone.

"What's bitten you in the arse?" Avi looked at Simon through the fringe of his hair as he pranced to the refrigerator with two Buy & Leave bags.

"Just in a good mood. Can't I be?"

"Yes. Just not around me when I'm in a bad mood, remember?"

"What's wrong?" Simon put some cartons of milk and orange juice in the refrigerator.

"I failed my psychology exam."

"Oh, shit. That's too bad," Simon said in a concerned tone.



"If I want, I can take the do-over exam this weekend, but if I take the exam Saturday morning, I'll miss rehearsal. If I go to rehearsal, I'll fail and have to take it again next term." Avi plugged in the kettle and faced Simon.

Simon thought for a moment. "Okay, no crisis. We can take care of this. Can't we cancel Saturday's rehearsal? We're going tomorrow night and the night after, anyway."

"I thought of that, but we'll lose the deposit on the space at the community center if we cancel. We're already on final notice with them, but I think losing the deposit is the better bargain when compared to another term of psychology."

"At least you won't have your parents breathing down your neck, telling you how much university is costing them if we cancel Saturday."

"Don't remind me. I had to make a call today to tell them I haven't gotten my monthly allowance yet." Avi swept his hair out of his face. "Sorry, Simon. I've just had a really shitty day, so I came home and took a nap."

"That's okay. Everything's covered. We'll be fine."

"So." Avi leaned against the counter. "What's gotten you in such a chipper mood?"

"Just...Callum. Again."

"Still."

"I know." Simon put a loaf of bread in the cupboard. "He's all I'm able to think about these days. And not just the sex, either."

"Liar," Avi muttered under his breath and tried to hide his smile.

Simon chose to ignore the remark. "He's such a sweet bloke. Those eyes and that smile. Lord help me, and that accent." He laughed a little. "Good Lord, I am such a girl."

"Yeah, I've seen you mooning over him. He's gotten to you and bad."

"He's just really special. I like spending time with him. He makes me feel all flippy inside."

Avi arched an eyebrow. "'Flippy'? He makes you feel 'flippy'?"

"Well, it's better than 'squishy-squeezy', innit?"

Avi walked over to Simon, put his hands on either side of his face, and kissed his forehead. "Congratulations, dear. You're hopelessly smitten."

Simon put his hand over Avi's. "I think it's more than that, Avi. I think I'm falling in love with him."

"That's great." Avi hugged Simon and kissed his neck. "I'm so happy for you."

"Well, don't get so excited." Simon pulled back. "He doesn't know it yet."

"You are going to tell him, right?"

"I want to make sure it's the real thing before I go blabbing it about."

"What about him? How does he feel?"

Simon's good mood darkened a little. "There are times where I think he might feel the same, but I really don't know. He *is* seeing that Brian person, as well."

"Wait a minute. He's seeing a Brian, too? How does he get two boyfriends and I don't get any?"

"Relax, Avi. Callum keeps telling me it's nothing serious between them." Simon paused. "At least, I hope it's nothing serious."

He bit his lower lip and hoped Avi had an answer.

Avi held up his hands. "Dear, you're asking the wrong guy."

"But there's something about him that I trust him when he says it."

"Then take his word for it. Let him know you understand he cares for Brian, but he needs to know how much you care for him, as well."

"Yeah, I guess. He seems pretty tough. He's only just divorced earlier this year, and it looks like he's adjusting rather well."

Avi's eyebrows went up. "Divorced? Well, who's to say you're not a rebound romance?"

Simon groaned. "Avi, there are times where I could just thump you. Things are complicated enough."

"And didn't you say he's only just come out?"

"Avi, please. I've been rolling all this in my mind."

"But it helps to say it out loud, doesn't it?"

"Christ, I don't know." Simon rubbed his forehead. "God, I was hoping for something less complicated in my next relationship."

Avi put his hands on Simon's shoulders, "It's a huge leap, but you've got to let him know. Otherwise, you'll be kicking yourself in the arse for the rest of your life if he does go off with this Brian person permanently."

"I just need to find the right time."

"Well, aren't they coming to Whip Smart?"

"Yeah." Simon nibbled the tip of his thumb as he stared at Avi's shoulder.

*Goodness, that thread's starting to fray.*

"Great. That'll give you plenty of time to feel him out and see if he'd be receptive."

"And enough time to prepare a speech I can say without passing out."

"Just smile a lot and let him see your eyes. It worked for me."

"Or," Simon said thoughtfully, "I just could use the ultimate test. Flowers. They've always worked for me in the past. It's a perfect gauge and I'll know immediately if things will work between us."

"Hey, yeah." Avi patted Simon on the chest. "That's brilliant. It's never failed you. When do you see him next?"

"Night after tomorrow. I'll try it then. This could be the start of something wonderful."

"Or it could be so horrible that you'll wind up with your soul crushed and your spirit broken, turning to the bottle for solace, eventually waking up in a puddle of your own sick at the entrance to Victoria Station, begging for pennies to buy a bun for brekkies."

"Sounds like that bargain holiday to Athens we took last year."

\* \* \* \*

Callum spotted Simon standing near the Tube station's waiting room exit. He looked rather dashing in a blue t-shirt, black jeans and boots, and a denim jacket and Callum was intrigued by the shyness of his smile. As Simon held his hands behind his

back, he walked toward Callum to meet him halfway across the waiting room. He kissed Callum on the cheek and said quietly, "Hi, there."

"Hallo, Simon."

Simon, still smiling, remained a couple steps back with his hands behind him.

"Are ye all right?" Callum asked, puzzled.

"Just fine. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay." Callum took a step closer. "Happy to see ye again," he whispered.

Simon kissed Callum again. "Same here. Hey, I've got something for you." He leaned back a little and brought his hands around to present Callum with a single red rose wrapped in green tissue paper.

"Simon!" Callum slowly took it. "Ye shouldn't have," he said cautiously before he sniffed it.

Simon shrugged. "Well, I just wanted to let you know how special you are to me."

"Thank ye. Good Laird, I must be blushing."

"You are, and it's very becoming, as usual." Simon leaned over and kissed the tip of Callum's nose.

"It's beautiful, Simon."

"Oh, you're welcome." Simon reached out and rubbed Callum's shoulder, then they moved closer for another kiss.

The tips of their tongues had just barely touched before Callum pulled back with another laugh. "It's me nose. Again."

"You haven't gotten over that yet?" Simon put his arm across Callum's shoulders and led him out of the station. "We've been seeing each other for how long now?"

"I'm only used to me own. Even then, I'm hardly aware it's there, except the days when I've fergotten to trim it."

"Don't worry. I'll ask mine to behave next time."

The next morning, Callum stared at the rose on the train ride to work. He wasn't sure if it was such a good idea to set it in a vase on his desk. When Simon presented it to him he didn't feel any panic, so he hadn't crossed any boundaries but what sort of

trauma fit would Brian throw? Every little thing about Simon seemed to set him off in one direction or another.

Callum closed his eyes and sniffed the rose. He'd told himself once before and it bore repeating: it wasn't about Brian any longer. He had something special with Simon and felt it could go deeper.

Callum had to consider the prospect of no longer dating Brian.

He opened his eyes and leaned his head against the window. He'd worry about that bridge and how to burn it properly when the time came; for now, however, he wanted to think about Simon.

\* \* \* \*

Brian met Callum at the train station and his eyebrows raised the second he spotted Callum's rose. "Oh, my. Simon?"

"Aye. I've got a vase in me desk somewhere, so I thought I'd bring it in so it wouldn't get lonely."

Brian's soul felt a little crushed. "If not, I've got one." He leaned closer and sniffed it.

*You blush and smile when Simon gives you a rose, yet you get upset when I accidentally call you 'babe'.*

"Bri, I can't believe how me makes me feel." Callum looked up at the sky on the walk to their office. "Talking to him that first night was the best decision I've made in ages. I've gotten to know him so well during the short time we've been going out, Bri. I find meself thinking about his eyes, his smile, his voice, how smart and funny he is, and now that he's gone and done this, I realize just how special he is." He closed his eyes. "But I can't be feeling like this, Bri. Not now."

They stopped on the front walk outside their building and Brian faced Callum. "Why not? You mean a lot to each other, so I see no reason..."

"Because ye and I are still seeing each other, and I don't want ye to get hurt. Because I've only just come out and I'm still figuring out who I am. Because at the beginning of this year, I was married. There. That's three reasons."

"Callum, any relationship is bound to have its complexities."

"But I don't want to do or say something stupid."

"Callum, I could just shake you right now!" Brian laughed in spite of how he felt. "He's bought you a flower! A rose, for Christ's sake! The only stupid thing you could do right now is say 'no, thanks' and ignore his advances. The boy's obviously pining for you. The hard work's already done, so listen to me." Brian put his hands on Callum's shoulders. "Go. With. Your. Gut."

"Ye're right, ye're right."

"I'm right, I'm right, yet you hem and haw with each new development, Callum."

"But I'm scared, Bri," Callum quietly said and laughed a little. "I'm more scared than I've ever been in me entire life."

"Oh, God, Callum." Brian hugged Callum. "I am a total cad. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so harsh."

"No, it's okay. Maybe it's the shock to me system I need." A couple of tears fell down his cheek.

Brian edged aside his misgivings about Callum's relationship with Simon. Callum was clearly confused and upset.

"God, I keep forgetting how fucking scared I was when I first came out," he said in a softer tone. "Look, you know how I keep asking you to be honest with me?"

"Aye."

"Turn it around. Now's the time for you to be honest with yourself. You've been doing it. It'll get easier with time."

"Why can't it be easy *now*?" Callum whined and stamped his foot.

Brian hugged Callum once more. "Again, I don't make the rules. I just misinterpret them the best I can."

"Thanks, Bri."

"You're welcome." Brian kissed Callum's neck before they separated again. "Hope this isn't too harsh a morning for you."

"No, I've had worse. That glorious day not too long ago when I nearly died of boredom in the courts whilst waiting for my divorce to be finalized. That one ranks right down there."

They hugged once more and as they held each other, Brian's thoughts turned back to Callum and Simon.

*God, I've got to start taking Callum's feelings into consideration. This is more about him than it is me. What was I saying about feeling left out and Callum not paying attention to me? Turn it around, Brian.*

"Everything all right, ladies?" Their moment had been interrupted by the sudden presence of Natalie.

They continued to hold each other as Brian looked at her. "Do you mind?" he asked, not bothering to hide his irritation. "Private conversation."

"Sorry. Public walk and all." Natalie continued to watch them as she walked into the building.

"Here's something to remember, you old cow," Brian muttered and flipped Natalie a middle finger salute. Her eyes wide in horror and her face pale, she quickly ran inside. "What, like she should be surprised I did that?"

Callum took a deep breath as he and Brian separated. "Right." He smoothed down his hair and straightened his tie. "No sense mucking about here whinging all day. Besides, I've got too much on my desk and if we stay out here blathering on about personal liberation and my love life for very much longer, we'll be late."

"Pants," Brian whispered before they made a mad dash inside.

Brian noticed the lost look on her face when Natalie returned to her desk. With a shrug, he made a note to ask Callum if he had anything to do with it. Not even settled in for the morning, Brian had just picked up his pen when his phone rang. "Brian Parker-Eddy, may I help you?"

"Mr. Parker-Eddy, Mr. Fairmerchant here. I know you've just gotten in, but I'd like to see you in my office."

"Of course. I'll be right there." After he hung up, Brian stood and said to Natalie, "Natalie, if anybody needs me, I'll be in Mr. Fairmerchant's office."

He removed his jacket from its hook and put it on.

"Yes, Brian." Her flat tone unsettled Brian as he left.

Once again, he was in front of the triumvirate of Fairmerchant, Mrs. Yarrow, and Mr. Kline. "Thank you for coming in," Fairmerchant said as Brian sat in the chair across from him.

"Certainly, Mr. Fairmerchant."

"After much deliberation, we have decided that we would like to offer you the position that will be vacated by Mrs. Yarrow upon her retirement, Mr. Parker-Eddy. That is, only if you're still interested." Brian swore he saw Fairmerchant had attempted a smile.

"Am I? You are? I will?" Brian asked in quick succession as his excitement built. "I mean, yes. Of course, I'm still interested. Thanks. Thank you, everybody."

"It wasn't a difficult decision," Mr. Kline said. "With your work history and knowledge of many of the processes in your department, we felt it would be simpler to offer you the promotion."

"Now, we expect you to keep this confidential until we've made the announcement," Fairmerchant continued. "You've done so thus far, so we trust it won't be any further convenience."

"Not at all," Brian lied.

"I'll be in touch with you as the time approaches to discuss salary and benefits," Mr. Kline said.

"Certainly," Brian replied.

"Congratulations, Brian," Mrs. Yarrow said. "I have every faith in you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Yarrow." Brian and Mrs. Yarrow shook hands. "Congratulations to you, as well."



"Well, if that's all, everybody, I'll leave you to it, Mr. Parker-Eddy," Fairmerchant said. "Thank you once more for coming in."

"Thank you." Brian left the office to the safety of the hall. He leaned against the wall, took a deep breath, and loosened his tie a little as he rubbed the back of his neck.

*Sweet holy Jesus God. It's supervisor time. Fab. Three more weeks. Fuck. Looks like it's time for yet another call to the parental units.*

\* \* \* \*

Callum and Simon stopped at a curry house for a take away dinner later that evening. "I just want to thank ye again for the rose," Callum said as their waitress left to place their order. "It's the first time anybody's ever bought me flowers."

Simon's blue eyes sparkled. "Oh, you're welcome."

"I confused a woman at work when I told her it was from me boyfriend."

"Really? What did she say?"

Callum shrugged. "Nothing, really. I think it surprised her that I knew somebody outside of work."

"Of course. Everybody at work is supposed to be one great, big, miserably uncomfortable, yet happy family."

"Which would probably make me and Bri the eccentric, unmarried uncles."

"Wouldn't that be rather...well...odd?"

"Uncles from different sides of the family."

"Must make for some interesting Christmas party conversation."

"I'm sure people aren't waiting fer Christmas."

The waitress brought them their order and put it in a bag.

"I know I'm just being paranoid," Callum continued. "Of course, since I have a job that lets me think too much, I'm able to imagine all sorts of crises."

"I tell myself I'm just honing my critical reasoning skills," Simon said before he paid the waitress and they left the restaurant. Simon put his arm across Callum's shoulders. "I'm glad you like the rose. I saw it and grabbed it on a mad, impetuous whim."

"It couldn't have come at a better time. It feels good to know somebody cares."

"Of course I do. You're coming off a rough time and you need all the encouragement you can get."

"I'm not feeling as fragile as I was a few months ago, but it's still nice of ye to think of me like that. Thank God ye din't get me a yellow one. I got some fer me wife just before we decided on the divorce."

"I prefer the red, actually."

"Obviously." Callum stroked Simon's ponytail.

"Okay, besides that. I'm talking about the romantic symbolism. I really care for you, Callum, and I'd like to see where this relationship goes."

"Don't worry. I do appreciate the gesture." Callum put his head on Simon's shoulder as his stomach tightened a bit at the mention of "romantic symbolism". "I also care fer ye quite a bit, Simon. It's obviously an awkward time fer me, but I'm certain I'm thinking clearly now. I'd like to see where this goes, too."

Simon kissed Callum head again. "You're really a special bloke, Callum. I hope you can see that."

"It's slowly sinking in. I'm also hoping fer a little stability, that everything will eventually smooth out."

"It will, more quickly than you'd expect."

"I'm holding ye to that." Callum shook his finger in Simon's face and laughed. "Else I shall be ever so cross with ye."

"Trust me. I know better than to incur the wraith of a Scotsman."

## Chapter Twenty-One

Callum approached Brian to go on break and tapped his shoulder.

"Jesus!" Brian gasped as he jumped. He breathed heavily as he faced Callum. "God. Sorry."

Callum seemed concerned. "Are ye all right? Ye're usually the proverbial pillar of strength but something's got ye unnerved to the point of serious distraction."

Brian caught his breath and stood. "Honestly? I'm still under orders not to say anything. Otherwise, I'll be in an arseload of trouble. You know you're the first person I'd say something to, if I could."

"No. I understand."

"Thanks, Callum. You'll find out soon enough."

"Come on. We'll get ye some tea and steady ye."

"How's Simon?" he asked in a desperate bid to distract himself from one worry with another.

"He seems to have this sixth sense as to when flowers have wilted. I always have a fresh rose on me desk every few days."

"That's sweet." Brian wondered how he could top it.

They got into the lift and Callum leaned against the rear wall of the car. "Honestly, Bri? I think he might be in love with me."

"Or damn near close to it, by the sound of it." Brian folded his arms and joined Callum at the rear. "So? How do you feel about him?"

Callum shrugged. "Not sure. It does seem like every time he sees me and gives me another rose, the feelings grow warmer and deeper."

"Well, you know you can always come to me if you need help."

"When ye aren't distracted by yer own troubles."

"No. I'm fine. I'll always have time for you."

"Especially when I'm buying."

"Especially when you're buying."

\* \* \* \*

Later that afternoon, Brian met with Mr. Kline.

"Well, Mr. Parker-Eddy, I'm sure you're very excited about this," Mr. Kline said as he assembled Brian's folder.

"I'm rather mixed right now. It's been difficult to keep it quiet."

"I understand. When I took this position, I had to keep it under wraps for about two weeks. It was a huge relief when I was able to tell my girlfriend." He handed Brian the folder. "Inside is all the information we need you to review and initial or sign." Brian opened the folder as Mr. Kline continued. "First off, your salary review. You'll see we're prepared to offer an additional fifty-five hundred pounds per year."

"Holy sh..." Brian stopped himself as he initialed the figure.

"Next is the standard contract of employment we offer all supervisors. Rather basic, really. Terms of confidentiality, compliance with company procedure, that sort of thing."

Brian flipped through the contract to skim the contents, and a particular item made him stop.

*Fraternization with Subordinates.*

He quickly read over the company policy that discouraged supervisors and subordinates from becoming romantically involved with one another. "Um, this non-fraternization passage?" Brian tapped his pen on the paragraph.

"Again, that's standard. While we don't have a clear-cut policy that actually forbids it, we do try to actively discourage it. It's the same one you see in the annual policy and procedures review you have."

"Right. Of course." Brian's hand shook as he signed it. He had no choice. Callum would understand, surely. Besides, he was happily involved with Simon so they could still remain the best of friends.

He hoped.

The sunken feeling followed him home as he stripped off his clothes and lay on his bed to stare at the ceiling in his underwear.

*Callum is going to be crushed when I tell him.*

"Jesus," he said out loud as he sat on the edge of the mattress. "That's going to sound good. 'Hey, I got the promotion and now I have to break up with you! Innit fabulous?'"

He rested his elbows on his knees and rubbed his face.

"God, how *am* I going to tell him?"

The sudden ring of the phone jostled him back into his bedroom, so he answered. "Hallo, Bri. It's me," Callum's cheerful voice said.

"Hello, Callum." Brian tried to pull himself together and hoped he sounded conversational.

"Are ye okay? Ye sound a bit off."

"No, I'm fine." Brian's stomach sank even further at the necessity to continue lying. "I'd dozed off shortly after coming home and the phone woke me up."

"Great timing, then. I won't be long. I know it's *EastEnders* night, so I won't cut into yer telly time. Simon just called and reminded me we're invited to Whip Smart weekend next. Think ye'd be up fer it?"

"Yeah. It'll be great."

"Good. It'll be a chance for ye to meet Simon. Sorry, I've got to dash now. Simon's picking me up fer dinner. Take care." Callum hung up.

"Bye, now," Brian said after the line went dead. He knew this day was coming, so he had to put his selfish feelings aside and support Callum as much as possible. The upcoming week and a half hung like ice on his shoulders.

"What was that Gran used to say about the Frozen Haddock of Life?" he muttered. "Like getting hit upside the head with a thawed haddock would be any better." Brian stood and walked to the kitchen for something that resembled dinner.

On his night out to Whip Smart with Callum, Brian arrived at Callum's house and paused when he saw the small bunch of roses on the step. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Frozen haddock, frozen haddock, frozen haddock," he muttered to himself as if it were a mantra as he bent over and picked them up.

*We've got our separate lives.*

Attached was a small cream-colored envelope with Callum's name written on it in elegant handwriting.

"Christ." Brian ran his fingers through his hair. "Bastard's even got better penmanship than me."

Brian looked down at the flowers. His first reaction was to turn around and find the nearest curbside bin and dispose of them properly, but his heart got the best of him. He couldn't hurt Callum, since he knew fully well there was an excellent chance Simon would ask about them later in the evening. He tapped his fist against his forehead a few times.

"Get. Over. Yourself."

There was every chance that Simon was just interested in fresh meat. Unconvinced, he sighed then pressed the doorbell, as he stared at the flowers in his hand.

When Callum answered, he found Brian holding the roses.

"Bri, ye din't have to." Callum took the flowers from Brian. "They're wonderful. Thanks."

Rather hurt, Brian followed Callum inside. "Actually, I didn't. That's...not my writing on the card."

Callum saw Simon's writing on the envelope. "I'm sorry." He put the flowers on the dining table. "They're...from Simon. I didn't mean to upset ye."

"No, I understand." Brian put his hands in his jacket pockets. "Listen. We've got a little time before we need to leave, so do you mind if we...talk?"

"No, not at all. Have a seat."

Brian sat on the couch and stared at the television as Callum sat next to him.

"I don't mean to add to your troubles right now, but I know I wasn't serious about my flirting with you, and I was thrilled when you started flirting back, but I've been having difficulty with you seeing Simon." Brian leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees while he continued to stare at the television. "I know I haven't been honest with you and I'm really sorry about it."

"So, this should have been a more exclusive relationship than it has been."

"No. No, not at all. I know I'm not the center of the universe..."

"I'm beginning to think the opposite. Ye of all people know what I've just been through," Callum said, his voice angry.

"I know that. I honestly never intended to hurt you in any way, Callum, but since we'd gotten involved, it was a shock when you met somebody else so quickly. I wasn't ready for it, especially when I'd spent so much time and energy pursuing you."

Callum put his hand over Brian's and softened a little. "Have ye been treating our relationship a little more seriously than ye should have?"

"No. No, I don't think so. Again, since I finally had your attention, I really didn't understand why you'd want to pay attention to somebody else. After all, you have me."

He tried smiling a little.

"I'll always have ye, Bri. Ye know that."

"I know, Callum. I'm sorry." Brian leaned over and hugged Callum. "As your best mate, I just want what's best for you."

"No matter what, Bri, I'll always find time for ye. Ye've been the best throughout all of this and I can't let ye go so quickly." As Callum hugged Brian tighter and rubbed his back, he knew what he had to tell Brian and his stomach knotted up at the thought.

*Not tonight.*

"So, are you certain Difficult Position are playing tonight?" Brian continued as they separated and hoped he picked up the mood a little.

"Positive." Their tongues briefly touched as they kissed. "Hi, there."

"Evening."

"Are ye okay, otherwise?"

"Maybe a little tired. I took a nap earlier, but I haven't been able to really wake up yet."

"Do ye still feel up to going out?"

"Yeah. "I'll be fine." A sudden yawn seemed to make him out a liar.

"Okay." They took each other's hands and left the house.

The cool evening air helped lift Brian's spirits a little as they walked to Whip Smart.

*Simon sounds like a decent guy, but he doesn't sound half as perfect as me.*

Brian breathed a quiet sigh of relief when they arrived at Whip Smart and the stage was still empty. He didn't have to meet Simon right away and was thankful the audience acted as a physical barrier between himself and the stage area. His apprehension mounted as he wondered what the hell he was so scared about and Brian laughed to himself as they waited at the bar for service. If anything, he had the advantage: he was the first one.

\* \* \* \*

After they got their drinks, Callum turned and looked out over the crowd for Simon. He was at the other end of the club with Avi near the stage. He had his back to them, so Callum waved and got Avi's attention.

"There they are," Callum said to Brian. "Now remember, be nice or I'll give ye such a pinch."

"Do we have to go now? I'm still sober." Callum pinched Brian's ear. "Okay! Okay, you win!" he said as they walked over to the stage.



\* \* \* \*

"Hallo, Avi," Callum said. "I'd like to introduce ye to Brian."

Brian's smile widened when he shook Avi's hand. "I do believe we've almost had the pleasure already."

Avi took a couple steps closer. "Oh, my God. You're right. Black pants at M&S."

"Yeah. Blue jeans, right?"

"I think so."

"And Brian, this is Simon," Callum continued.

Simon tried to smile more naturally as he turned around. It soon faded as flashes of recognition between him and Brian gave way to baleful, wide-eyed looks of surprise, horror, and shock. They finally pointed at each other and shouted "You!" in unison, loud enough to draw glances from several people.

"Jesus Christ, it's Prissy Parker-Eddy," Simon said, amused.

"And if it isn't Ginger Minge," Brian replied sarcastically.

"Is that the best you could come up with? 'Ginger Minge?'"

"Well. And here I was, worried that the two of ye wouldn't get along," Callum said.

Simon continued to stare at Brian. "We went to St. Apollonaria's together. I could always count on having him in my English composition class every damned year. Sorry I turned you down so much and so often, old man. Wasn't sure which team I was on, though I was quite flattered."

"So the stories about you and Deacon Wilkins weren't true, then."

"Just the one. Although from what I'd heard, you could have told me he was such a great kisser."

Brian stuck out his tongue. "Bastard."

"Well, boys." Avi rubbed his hands together and jumped in before things got worse, "I hate to break up Old Home Night, but Simon, we need to get to work."

"Righty-o." Simon climbed onto the stage and sat behind his drum kit.

\* \* \* \*

Brian's face burned as Callum led him to the back of the club, away from the stage.

*I'm missing my show for what?*

He had to admit Difficult Position were rather good, live music being a vast improvement over the jukebox selection at the Feather and Larch. When he and Callum joined Avi and Simon for a drink later, Brian felt drained of any emotion.

"See, Bri? I told ye they were good," Callum said a bit too cheerfully, Brian thought.

"Yeah."

"You work in the City with Callum, right, Brian?" Avi asked.

"Sure."

*Christ, if this weren't so tragic, it'd be funnier than fuck.*

"Excuse me, but I need to find the gents'," Brian said. "We'll take this up after I return, okay?" He left without waiting for anybody's response.

In the gents', Brian stared at the mirror over the sink.

"I don't fucking believe this," he muttered to himself, as he shook the water from his hands to dry them. "There has got to be some...what the hell's going on here?"

The man at the sink next to him wondered the same thing as he glanced over. Brian leaned his right hand on the sink, put his left fist on his hip, and looked over at the door.

"Jesus fuck!" he said, a bit more loudly this time. "I don't get it. Of all the people he could be seeing, it had to be him." The other man tried to remain out of Brian's line of vision as he quickly dried his hands and left the room.

Brian checked his reflection in the mirror again. "No, don't see any haddock scales," he muttered as he ran his fingers through his hair. "You can do this, mate. No matter what, smile like you mean it." With a quick, deep breath, Brian went back out to the table. He found Callum and Simon had stood up, about to leave. "Over so soon?"

"Aye, sorry," Callum replied. "Simon has tomorrow off and I thought I'd take advantage of it."

"Oh. It's just...it's the weekend. I figured..." He stopped. "Sorry, Callum. Didn't mean to assume."

"Thanks, Bri. I'll make it up to ye this next week."

"Nah." Brian's heart was beating so heavily, he swore everybody in the club could hear it. "Don't worry. You can buy the first cuppa Monday morning."

"Nice to see you again, Brian." Simon held out his hand.

Brian shook it with what he hoped was true sincerity. "You, too. Fucking bizarre we had to meet again under these circumstances."

"Beats a police line-up, yeah?"

"Not quite as glamorous." Brian waved to them as they left and watched the door for a while when they were gone.

*Yeah, they ain't coming back.*

Brian tried to leave, as well, but he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Brian looked over his shoulder and saw Avi. "Yeah. I'll be okay."

"Come on." Avi steered Brian back to the now vacant table and made him sit. "I'll buy you a pint and you can tell me all about it."

"Yeah," Brian whispered as Avi collected the empties and went up to the bar.

Avi set Brian's cider in front of him on the table, but Brian just stared at the glass. Avi waited a moment or two before he nudged him with his elbow.

"Hm?" Brian asked absentmindedly.

Avi gave him a friendly smile and pointed at his glass.

"Oh. Cheers." Brian pulled his glass closer and took a sip.

"So. Tell us about it?" Avi asked and took a drink of his own bitter. Brian soon told Avi his entire history with Callum, how he felt left out of Callum's life since Simon had gotten involved, his promotion, the shock at meeting Simon again, how afraid he was to

tell Callum they couldn't date any longer. As he spoke, Brian noticed Avi took a keen interest in what he was saying, intently watching Brian with his beautiful dark eyes.

*I wonder what a musician's hands feel like.*

Brian took advantage of an occasional downcast gaze to steal a glance at Avi's fingers.

When he was finished, Brian gave Avi a small, hopeful smile. "Goodness, you do have a lot on your mind," Avi said in a reassuring tone, "but, just my stupid opinion, are you certain you aren't beating yourself up over nothing? Look at the huge amount of pressure on you right now. Telling me should be some sort of relief."

"It is."

"So? Why the grief?"

"I just don't want Callum to be hurt after I break things off with him."

"Didn't you see how much he and Simon were mooning over each other tonight?"

"Yeah. How could I not?"

"Feeling a trifle left out?"

"A trifle."

Avi ran his fingertip over the back of Brian's hand. "Well, you really don't have to feel so lonely or left out, you know." He looked up at Brian's face through his hair and smiled.

"God, I'm such a fickle bitch." Brian turned Avi's hand over and trailed his fingertips over his palm. "It's funny. As much as I treasure my solitude and as often as I rail against ever finding another 'life partner', you'd think I wouldn't get so upset over not having Callum around as much."

"You'll still see him at work, won't you?"

"Yeah, but it won't be the same, will it?"

"From what I'd seen between you and Callum, I honestly don't think there'd be any way the two of you will stop being friends. You like each other too much."

"Yeah. But things have just been so rocky for me lately. I've been relying on Callum a little for some stability and I'm afraid I'll be losing that."

"And you won't. Because why?" Avi held his hand up to his ear.

Brian laughed. "Because Callum and I will still be friends."

"You know, I've got Simon's van. I could give you a ride back to your place, if you'd like." Avi turned Brian's hand over and ran the tip of his index finger over the palm.

"I would really, really like that right now, Avi, but I can't. I just can't."

"Okay. I understand."

"I just need some time to digest all this."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

Avi kissed the back of Brian's hand, then took a business card case from his jacket. "Here's my cell number. Give us a ring any time you need, right? Sounds like you need to break from your treasured solitude a little more often and expand your universe beyond Callum."

Brian took Avi's card. "Jesus, I hate it when somebody else is right."

"Give it some thought." Avi stood to leave. "In the meantime, call whenever you need. If I'm in class or rehearsal, I don't answer, so leave a message." He moved closer to Brian and took his head between his hands. "You'll be okay tonight?"

"I'll be fine."

"Good." Avi kissed Brian on the forehead. "Please call. I'd love to see how those pants look on you."

"Good night, Avi. And thanks."

"I'll see you later, then," Avi said with a smile before he released Brian and left.

Brian drained his glass and checked his pocket for any spare change.

*It's still pretty early. There might be a few religious nutters at the Tube stations.*

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Simon and Callum were silent for most of the walk back to Callum's house. Simon thought about trying to hold Callum's hand but Callum was rather quiet and distant.

They stopped on the front walk at Callum's house. "He can be a nice bloke, Simon. Really," Callum said. "Did he seem a little...off just before we left?"

"A little. I think my sudden reappearance must have put a ding in his plans."

"Aye, that's true. It wouldn't be the first time this has happened."

"From what I remember of him at school, he's pretty resilient. Bounce back before you know it."

"He usually does but...enough people in me life have gotten hurt lately, and I can't keep going. I need to let Bri go sooner than later." Callum motioned to the door. "Would ye care to come in? I'll put the kettle on."

"Okay," Simon answered quietly, then followed Callum inside. After Callum had closed the door, Simon decided to take a chance and put his arms around Callum. "Okay?"

"Aye." Callum hugged Simon back. "I will be." They held each other in the dark front room for a few moments. "So. Where does that leave us?"

"You know I want to keep seeing you, right?"

"Aye."

"Well, how...serious will we get once you've spoken to Brian? Will be exclusive?"

Callum shrugged. "I'm not sure. Maybe once I stop feeling like a pull toy, I'll have a better answer. Why? What are ye getting at?"

Simon's heart was pounding. "Nothing. That came out wrong, but I'd be more comfortable knowing how we fit into each other's lives."

"Jesus, Simon." Callum pulled away. "I won't break things off with ye, if that's what ye're asking."

"Shit. I'm not trying to manipulate you, Callum."

"But I haven't even broken up with Bri just yet. Have a little compassion, yeah?"

"You're right. I shouldn't have even brought it up just now."

"No, ye shouldn't have." Callum walked past Simon and headed upstairs.

"Damnit," Simon said to himself as a door slammed overhead. He went upstairs and switched on the hall light. He found the bathroom door was closed, so he went over and gently knocked. "Callum? I'm really sorry about that."

Callum didn't open the bathroom door.

"Why did ye even do it?" he asked in a measured tone. "I keep hearing from all sides that everybody's fine with me seeing the other bloke but now everybody's wondering when I'm going to stop seeing the other bloke. I've had major bust-ups over it with Bri, and now I'm rowing over it with ye, Simon."

"I really wish I had an answer for you, Callum, but that's just it. I really don't know why I'm acting the way I am. Maybe I'm just jealous you aren't paying attention to me. Maybe I'm mad at myself for getting so bent out of shape. I know it doesn't ease the stress but I'm at more of a loss because I'm the one who threw the tantrum and I'm not certain why. Maybe I love you. I don't know."

"Beg pardon?"

"I said that maybe I love you."

Callum quickly opened the door and stared at Simon. "Are ye serious? I mean. Are ye serious?"

"Yeah," Simon all but whispered. "I've been wanting to tell you for some time now, but I wanted it to be a lot more...special."

"Are...ye serious?"

"Yes, I'm very serious."

"Holy shite." Callum cleared his throat. "That's...quite...Simon."

"Look, I'm sorry if I've embarrassed you," Simon's voice caught. "But it's how I feel and I've been wanting to tell you. I mean, I'll try to understand if you don't feel the same way, but..."

"Don't worry, Simon," Callum quietly said. "I feel the same way. I think I love ye, too."

"Hello?" Simon blinked a couple times.

"Well, ye started it."

Simon reached up and stroked Callum's cheek. "I mean it, you know," he whispered as he looked into Callum's eyes.

As they kissed, Callum didn't really mind that Simon's mustache tickled his nose.

\* \* \* \*

Brian quickly drank the lager he had (his fifth? sixth?) then spotted an elderly woman as she herded a group of children in his direction. Each child carried a plastic shopping bag, and some occasionally stopped to pick up some litter, so he tried to maintain an illusion of composure as he walked over.

"Good morning, all," he said to the group. They stopped, the children taking a step back toward the woman. "Sorry to startle you, but I was wondering if I could trouble you to take my empty?"

Mrs. Wattle carefully sized up Brian. He seemed a little messy and quite a bit drunk, and he hadn't advanced any closer. "Set it on the ground. We'll collect it in a bit."

"Thanks again." Brian smiled before he bent over and put the can on the walk.

Big mistake; the alcohol quickly spun to his head, so he had to stand slowly.

The morning sun seemed a lot brighter than he remembered it and the contents of his stomach threatened to evacuate.



"Carry on," he muttered and the whisper caused his temples to throb. He turned around and walked to Callum's front door; as he paused, Mrs. Wattle motioned to a boy who quickly dashed forward, grabbed Brian's empty, and ran back to the group. Mrs. Wattle then checked the road for traffic before she led her charges to the walk opposite.

Brian carefully leaned against Callum's front door. "You can do this, mate." He pulled back a little and knocked, his knuckles landing heavily on the door. Soon, he heard the chain rattle and the door opened. "Mornin', squire. Spare a penny for the guy?"

"Well." Callum folded his arms across his chest. "Surprise finding ye out there. How long ye been?"

"Not very." Brian brought his hand up to shield his eyes. "Nice neighbors."

Mrs. Wattle's group came into view and watched the scene at Callum's front step. Callum waved hello before he helped Brian inside. "Good grief, mon. Tell me ye din't wee yerself." He caught a whiff as he closed the door and steered Brian toward the kitchen.

"I think I spilled at least two cans." Brian slurred his words as he sat down at the table. "Just as well. Fucking Christ, I hate that kind of lager."

"If ye weren't drunk, I'd say ye were making fun of me accent." Callum went to a cupboard and took out two mugs. "No sleep, I take it?"

"I remember the train reaching the Marylebone station, and I think Jubilee, at some point, but not much else." Brian paused. "Did you know the police patrolling the Tubes can be a rather pleasant lot?"

The kettle clicked off, so Callum put a spoonful of instant coffee into each of the mugs, poured in some water, and took the mugs over to the kitchen table. He sat down and said, "Drunk or not, we're talking about this *now*."

Brian sighed and stirred his coffee. "I really could've handled things differently last night. The injured victim really doesn't suit me well." He handed the spoon to Callum.

"Aye. Ye could have."

"Maybe we should just...take a break. I'm obviously not mature enough to handle this sort of relationship."

"No, probably not."

"Still friends?"

"Aye, unfortunately. Can we just keep it to work, though? Just breaks and lunch, the occasional pint out? No sleepovers."

Brian's head had stopped spinning but it soon began going in the opposite direction and his temples throbbed mercilessly. "That...will work just fine. For now. Actually, for now, I could really use a handful of aspirin and some sleep." He put his mug down and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes.

Callum stood. "The guest room's been changed, so ye can go up when ye're ready. Let me get the aspirin."

Brian folded his arms on the table and rested his chin on them. "I'm really sorry about all this," he all but whispered, fighting to stay awake.

"I am, too, Bri." Callum shook two aspirin from a bottle.

"You must think I'm a sad, horrible little man for behaving like this."

Callum handed the aspirin to Brian, who washed them down with most of his coffee. "Fer drinking yerself into a blind stupor and riding the Tube all night? I think ye're a right arse. I'm not worth it, Brian. Nobody is. Ye've even said so yerself."

"I'm not arguing." Brian sat up and rolled his head back as his arms dangled at his sides. "But could I please wallow in self pity and vomit in peace?"

"Ye're right. No lectures. I should save them fer after ye've regained consciousness and ye're hung over."

"I knew I could count on you to come through for me." Brian held up his index finger to emphasize his point. "Now. If you would be so kind as to help me stand, what? I really do need a wee and the longer I sit here, the greater the chance I have of passing out with my eyes open."

Callum stooped next to Brian and put his arm around his neck. "Come on. Ready? On three. One, three."

Brian leaned against Callum as they stood. His stomach had settled somewhat but his head continued its relentless pounding.

"If I make it through this alive," Brian said as they slowly turned around, "I'll apologize again."

"Ye've already done, Bri. I've accepted it unconditionally."

They slowly walked out of the kitchen. "But I'm drunk, Callum. Apologies never stick when the party apologizing is drunk. Against the laws of physics or something."

"Bri, ye've never done anything fer me to doubt yer veracity. Ever."

Brian turned around, his eyes red from the alcohol and the tears that were forming. "I just need to know, Callum, is everything okay between us?"

Callum finally softened and kissed Brian's cheek through his coarse beard stubble. "I can only keep reassuring ye, Brian, but aye. Everything's fine."

"Good." Brian clumsily wiped his nose with his jacket sleeve with a loud snuffle. "Now maybe I can die in peace."

"Ye aren't going to die."

"The way I feel right now, I really wish I would." Without waiting another second, Brian broke into a run, upstairs and to the bathroom.

After his nausea subsided, Brian splashed some cold water on his face. As he dried off, Callum stepped into the bathroom. "Come on. Let's get ye into bed."

Brian put the towel on the vanity then allowed himself to be led down the hall to the guest room. He removed his jacket and dropped onto the edge of the mattress.

"Go ahead and lie down." Callum knelt on the floor as Brian rolled onto his back.

"Thanks," Brian quietly whispered as Callum removed his shoes then swung his legs around so that he was lying completely on the bed. "Careful. Wouldn't want to trigger another episode."

"Listen, I'll be in and out fer most of the day." He put his hand on Brian's chest. "Ye just stay here and sleep it off. If ye're feeling better later and I'm not here, ye can leave if ye need to. Just pull the front door closed and it'll lock behind ye."

"Why are you still being so nice to me?"

"Because I'm not a heartless bastard and ye need somebody to take care of ye right now. Now get some sleep. The orange juice is in the refrigerator. Make sure ye have some before ye leave."

Brian kissed the back of Callum's hand. "I'll see you later," he said and slipped off to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The bed, while comfortable, was unfamiliar. The patterns in the room's light were off, so Brian could only deduce he wasn't at home. He kept his eyes closed and tried to fight off the metallic aftertaste in his mouth. The painful memory of the previous night became more vivid as he slowly opened his eyes to the mid-afternoon sun that streamed in through the window.

"Oh, yeah," he muttered and closed his eyes again. "Over at Callum's, bless him."

He'd slept the entire time on his back but Brian wasn't sure what his stomach would do if he attempted to turn onto his side. It didn't matter, anyway. His limbs felt as if they'd turned into concrete slabs and weren't cooperating. He figured he was close to death, his head stuffed with cotton and every square inch of his body screamed out in sheer agony. It just felt good to sleep, the one activity he felt he could accomplish in his current state.

When Brian woke up again, the sun had begun to set. He'd rolled over onto his side in his sleep and his stomach didn't protest as he slowly sat up. The pounding in his head had only worsened so he willed himself to stand to go down to the kitchen so he could patch himself up. He opened the bedroom door and heard the television down in the front room. Callum was home so that would give Brian the perfect opportunity to apologize and thank Callum once more before he headed back home. Brian went downstairs and into the front room, then stood next to the couch. "Evening," he quietly said to Callum, giving a small wave.

Callum looked over at Brian then back at the television. "Evening."

Brian put his hand down, unable to read Callum. He may have been distracted by the program, but Brian felt there was quite a bit of distance between them. "I'll just...pop into the kitchen and get some orange juice."

Callum kept his attention on the television. "It's in the fridge, where it usually is."

"Right," Brian muttered before he went out to the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

When he was gone, Callum switched off the television with the remote. He wasn't sure any longer how he felt about Brian. After what had happened at Whip Smart and later, he couldn't see Brian on an intimate basis any longer but he didn't know if he could shut Brian out completely.

Callum's experience with breaking up was limited, so he had no clue if it was even possible for them to go back to how things were before. True, Simon still lived with Avi but that had to have been a unique case.

Wasn't it?

How was Callum to know if gay men remained "just friends" on a regular basis? Hell, how was he to know if straight men remained friends with their exes on any sort of basis? People he knew that had broken up hardly ever saw or spoke to each other ever again. Of course, he'd never have any chance for comparison; Theresa inherited the friends in the divorce.

The front room suddenly became a silent tomb. Callum realized his circle of friends was simply...gone. Almost everybody he'd ever socialized with after he'd gotten married was somebody Theresa had known. Most of his school friends were up in Scotland and Brian was the first he'd made after moving to London.

For all his peculiarities, Brian had proven time and again Callum could count on him. Callum knew full well they couldn't continue with the way things were. They had their time-out so Callum decided to use that time to figure out what to say to Brian and when. His arms still crossed, Callum went into the kitchen.

Brian sat at the kitchen table, nursing a glass of orange juice. When Callum walked in, he looked down at the table. "Hi."

"Hi." Callum sat at the table, across from Brian. "Feeling better?"

"My head's still killing me, but I'm able to keep down some water and this juice. I shouldn't have any trouble on the way home." Brian looked up at Callum. "I hope I don't sound like a broken record, Callum, but I'm honestly and truly sorry for last night."

"I know ye are. I think we'll have to carry on just as friends fer the time being. Think ye can handle it?"

Brian was a bit more relieved as he saluted Callum with his glass. "Absolutely."

"But if ye pull another ridiculous stunt like this ever again, I won't hesitate to string ye up by yer bollocks and hang ye from Nelson's Column."

"Yes, mum."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

It seemed to be the standard retirement party, but Callum caught a whiff of something monumental under it. Brian had arrived at work that morning in a brand new suit, the charcoal grey going perfectly with his eyes and hair. As usual, everybody had broken off into their little cliques, the IT geeks on their own, Natalie and her book club disappeared in another corner, Brian and Callum oblivious to her cutting glares as they sat with other unit heads.

Occasionally, somebody would slip away from their pack and offer their congratulations to Mrs. Yarrow, who sat at a table with some of her supervisor friends, only to dash quickly back, afraid their presence would be missed and the rest of their herd would excommunicate them.

"I'm surprised Natalie's not with the rest of the unit heads," Brian said as he and Callum inspected the rest of the cheese platter on the buffet line.

"Bri. Think about it. That would be admitting she knew us." Callum was careful to select only the orange cheese as he picked up a couple pieces.

"Hopefully there's a major shake-up when they announce Mrs. Yarrow's replacement."

"Have ye heard anything about it? They've usually let us know around the time of the party."

Brian picked up the serving fork next to a smoked salmon. "No. Probably still in the interviews, I suspect."

"Ye seem to be a bit excited over her departure. I thought ye got on rather well together."

"We do. She's one of the better supervisors I've had anywhere."

"The only thing I can think of that could bring ye to such a level of anticipation is Natalie's leaving, as well."

Brian winked and tapped the side of his nose. "All will be revealed in time, my son," he said in a reassuring tone.

"In all the time I've known ye, I've never wanted to smack yer chops more than I do now." Callum glanced at Brian's plate and the decimated salmon on the table. "Bri, did ye want to leave some fer the rest of us?"

"Huh?" Brian looked at his plate. "Oh, dear. Take half?"

"Honestly." Callum transferred some salmon from Brian's plate to his and they turned back to the unit head table.

As they walked, Callum and the other unit heads exchanged some odd hand signals. A couple were disappointed as Callum beamed.

"The hell?" Brian asked.

"Nothing. Just...nothing."

"My arse. Are you taking bets on my buffet trips again?"

"Quit yer bellyaching. Ye just made seventy-five quid."

"Fucking hell, Callum."

"Just think of all the man panties that'll buy."

Brian bit a piece of celery. "Especially if they're on sale."

\* \* \* \*

Finally.

Callum had been worried what effect their time-out would have on him, but Brian had lightened up, becoming almost the same person he'd been before his secret meetings with Fairmerchant. Mrs. Yarrow's departure couldn't have come at a worse



time with the approach of the month's end crunch. Callum tried to muster a prayer for her successor as he scanned the subject lines of his email for any items he needed for his early reports, when one popped up that read "IMPORTANT STAFF ANNOUNCEMENT." He clicked on the email and opened it.

*Hope whomever they chose knows how to swim upstream.*

Callum read through the email, past the congratulations to Mrs. Yarrow for her years of service, over the declaration how choosing her successor was a difficult one, and his jaw dropped at the name listed.

*Brian Parker-Eddy.*

"Bloody hell!" Callum quickly clapped both hands over his mouth as several people looked in his direction.

"Christ," he quietly swore to himself as he stood and went over to Brian's desk. No wonder he'd been jumpier than hell since forever.

\* \* \* \*

Brian was sorting his work into "priority," "later" and "burn" piles when Callum arrived. "Goodness. Tea so close to quitting time?"

Callum leaned onto Brian's desk. "So that's what ye've been up to lately, ye little shite."

"Beg pardon?"

"The email. Yer promotion!"

Brian let out a heavy sigh as he leaned back in his chair. "Oh, thank God. I can finally breathe again."

*Almost.*

"Congratulations, Bri."

"Thanks, Callum. I've always hoped for a chance like this and now that I've made it, I'm staggering."

"Yer own office now and everything?"

"And a small group of minions to do my every bidding. Today London, tomorrow the world. It broke Mum's and Dad's hearts the first day I put on a suit and tie for work, but now that I'm a supervisor, they're really crushed."

"But ye're still their little longhaired weirdo fighting the corporate struggle from within. Hail to the chief." Callum saluted.

"I hope you understand why I wasn't able to say anything."

"Completely. Be yer luck, they would have promoted Natalie if ye had." Natalie came around the corner and glared at them as she sat at her desk. "Afternoon."

"Yes. Isn't it?" Natalie began to put her things away.

Brian sat up again. "Well, now that it's over, shall we pop out to the Feather and Larch tonight? I'm sure we can round up a few others."

"Sounds great."

"Natalie? Care to join us?"

Natalie rolled her eyes. "No. Thank you."

"Sorry. Just asking."

"Just the same."

Brian and Callum exchanged glances. "So, I'll just meet you down there after work, okay?"

"Sure. I'll be there as soon as I can. Congratulations again."

"Thanks." They waved and Callum went back to his desk. After he was gone, Brian leaned back again. He didn't have to say anything to Callum right away. Plenty of time before he moved Upstairs.

No. Wait. That's right. They were already on a break. "Just friends."

*Here I was, expecting to be relieved after the announcement. Damned haddock.*

\* \* \* \*

Later that week, Callum lay awake in bed and stared at the ceiling. It was late but he couldn't get to sleep, even with the comfort of Simon next to him.

"I can't be the one to piss on Bri's parade," he said as he rubbed Simon's upper arm, "but I have to tell him about us."

"This is one of those moments I can't help but think the universe has a sick sense of humor," Simon quietly replied.

"It is rather a *deus ex machina* moment, innit? We've got that 'no fraternization' policy, anyway, so we can't continue dating even if we wanted."

Simon chuckled. "Doesn't make it any easier."

"No, it doesn't. Maybe we'll engineer it so that we tell each other at the same time."

"Did you want me to be there when you tell him?"

"No, I think ye being there would intimidate him too much."

"He's still welcome to come watch Difficult Position at Whip Smart, though. I don't think it would be fair of me to demand he keep away."

"Still, I do love him in a way. I just don't want him to be hurt." Callum chuckled. "Simon? Make me stop worrying about this."

"Brian's probably having the same headaches. Even though it's foregone, you need to find out where you stand."

"Aye. I'd hate to lose him entirely."

"Just talk to him soon, yeah? Don't let it drag out."

"We're meeting tomorrow after work at the Feather and Larch, so I'll bring it up then."

"Don't worry. You care for each other too much to completely let go. You'll still be friends after all this."

"Ye're right." Callum turned onto his side and moved closer to Simon. "I'm just running circles around this."

"Brian's probably having the same conversation with himself right now."

\* \* \* \*

Across London, just over the Thames, Brian was occupied with a slightly different matter. He lay in bed with his eyes closed and his arm around Avi, who ran his fingers through Brian's chest hair.

"Thanks again for popping out for a drink tonight," Brian said.

"Always glad to. End of term's on the horizon and it's a great excuse to go out and play for a bit."

"Spending the night again?"

"Sure. Hope you don't mind."

"Of course not." Brian turned onto his side and faced Avi. "Haven't you noticed how cleverly I've engineered our evenings together so you always happen to miss the last train out?"

"Yes, and I'm too polite to say anything."

They kissed for a moment as Brian stroked Avi's cheek with the back of his fingers.

"Thanks again," Brian said. "It's been a little quiet since Callum and I cooled things off."

"Have you had a chance to talk to him yet and make the break permanent?"

"We're getting together for a drink next Friday to celebrate my last day on the floor. I think he'll handle it well, but I still feel like I'm letting him down."

"Well, you've pledged to be honest with each other. Think of how he'd feel if you weren't."

"He's pretty resilient, so he should be okay."

\* \* \* \*

Brian felt a little sad as he packed the last box of his possessions to take up to his new office. He had to remind himself he wasn't leaving the firm outright and it was simply a move Upstairs. In fact, the entire day was a mess of conflicting emotions: the move, leaving his old desk, his blossoming relationship with Avi, needing to have The Talk with Callum and trying to duck Natalie as she picked up the smaller work Brian

wasn't able to complete before he left. By the time the last box was secured in his office (he couldn't get over actually having four walls and a door he could hide behind), Brian felt he deserved to get as drunk as the situation required.

After he waved good bye to everybody (Natalie was conspicuous in her absence), Brian left with Callum for the Feather and Larch. They were relieved to meet a few others from the office, thankful to have the buffer once again. Brian noticed Callum and quickly looked away, afraid of hurting him.

Against his gut feeling, Brian started his second drink around the time he'd normally be on his fourth. Uncertain if the nausea was the alcohol or his nerves, Brian finally pulled himself up to his full height and approached Callum, who'd stood in a spot by the jukebox, away from Brian and everybody else. "Hi," Brian said and smiled a little.

"Hi." Callum wasn't able to avoid Brian's eyes.

"So. I suppose you're wondering what effect this promotion is going to have on...us."

"Actually, this is an interesting segue because I've needed to bring up the subject for some time now."

"Is this going to be a good 'about us' discussion?"

"I'm not sure."

Brian took a deep breath. "Considering the turn of things, I'm not able to continue seeing you. I mean, even though we're taking a break. The 'no fraternization' clause." He quickly drained his glass and set it on top of the jukebox.

"No problem, Bri. I'd figured it out the day ye were promoted. Besides, ye're supposed to be enjoying yerself and celebrating, yeah?"

"Yeah, such as it is." Brian sighed and put his hands in his pockets. Callum's wide brown eyes reflected light from the jukebox and shone brightly to melt Brian's heart a little. "I really didn't want you to get hurt."

"I'm fine, considering."

\* \* \* \*

Callum set his glass on a nearby table and his breathing slowed as he stepped closer to hug Brian. He reached up and stroked Brian's hair as Brian kissed his neck. They pulled back, Brian's arms over Callum's shoulders and Callum's around Brian's waist.

Callum hesitated for a second against the pull he felt and when he gave in and kissed Brian, their lips lingered longer than either expected. Brian pulled back first but Callum gave no indication he had to stop so he kissed Callum again, their mouths opening to let their tongues brush together. It was a long, slow kiss and neither wanted to be the one to end it.

Callum brought his hands up to Brian's chest as his heart raced.

*Jesus Christ, what the fuck am I doing?*

Brian slid his hands down to Callum's ass and massaged it.

*Something's seriously wrong with this.*

He had his hands on Brian's chest as Brian held him, and they were kissing but Callum couldn't help but feel something was missing.

Then Brian turned his head and brushed his mustache against Callum's nose.

Callum pulled away and gasped, surprised by the movement on his skin. "Good Laird."

Brian chuckled. "I'm sorry, Callum. Did I tickle your nose again?"

Callum rubbed his nose. "No, Bri. It...I din't feel it."

"What?"

"Yer mustache din't tickle. I din't feel a thing." Callum moved his hand and pulled Brian's away. "I'm...not feeling anything, Brian. I can't do this."

"Callum, I..."

"I'm sorry if I led ye on, Bri." Callum crossed his arms and stepped away from Brian. "I can't do this any longer."

"Simon?"

Callum found the strength to look into Brian's eyes. "Aye. In fact, I've been wanting to tell ye I'm in love with Simon."

Brian blinked a few times. "Wow. Callum. You and Simon?"

"Aye."

"I don't know what to say, Callum."

"Sorry to steal yer thunder tonight, but I wanted to tell ye when the timing was better."

"Well, it couldn't get any better than now, really. Frozen haddock meet Brian's head. Brian's head, meet frozen haddock."

"Beg pardon, Bri?"

"Nothing." He shook his head and put his hands in his pockets again. "Of all the guys in the world, you had to pick Ginger Minge."

"Bri, it just happened. Ye know I couldn't have planned any of this. When are ye going to realize the universe doesn't have some grand scheme against ye?"

"It's pretty damned funny, though. Are you happy? Really and truly?"

"Aye."

"Come on, then. Safe hug this time." They hugged once more, the feeling still warm between them. "Callum, you couldn't get rid of me unless you tried really, really hard. We still work at the same place so we'll see each other on a daily basis. If anything, the time we've spent together has made me realize how much I value our friendship."

"Ye won't be rid of me that easy, either. Ye're me best mate, Bri. I can't shut ye out now that I've got a serious boyfriend. In fact," they separated, "Simon thinks ye're a decent bloke and wouldn't mind seeing ye down at Whip Smart more often."

*Half the truth is better than none.*

"Yeah. About that. Considering my history with him, I'll have to ease into anything even remotely resembling a friendly acquaintance with him. I'll certainly make the effort for your sake. Especially since Avi and I have started seeing each other on a more —" He cleared his throat. "— intimate basis, as well."

"God, aren't we just a couple of school girls, dating two blokes from the same band?"

Brian bit his knuckle. "Callum? I think I'm getting bumpier."

"*Vive le rock*." Callum hugged Brian once more, a little tighter this time. "I suppose this means ye want yer Iggy Pop CDs back."

"Eventually, yes."

\*



We hope you enjoyed this gay romantic comedy from new AMP author Andy Dunn. If you enjoyed *But I Never Said I Didn't Love You!* be sure you check out our other m/m stories, authors and series at <http://www.aspenmountainpress.com/>.

For news of more stories from Andy or any of our other fantastic authors, please take the time to join the Aspen Mountain Press readers' community loop at [www.amp\\_community@yahoo.com](http://www.amp_community@yahoo.com).

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